

The background of the cover is a dramatic landscape. The top half is dominated by a dark, heavy sky with swirling, dark clouds. Below the sky, there is a thin, dark horizontal line representing the horizon. The bottom half of the image shows a dark, textured sea or ocean surface. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

GARBLEDARK: LED ASTRAY

E. W. ROBINSON

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E. W. Robinson

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PART ONE: NORTH

Note: McJimray's recognises this stream of consciousness as a series of intermingling essences in which the observer can take a dip in order to calculate appropriate responses.

A current of risk-taking can be followed north, through an unremarkable neighbourhood, a jigsaw puzzle forced together by many hands - the puzzle image cannot be described in itself.

A multitude of calculations pending results...

A car, out of character for this era, struggles to find a gear, carrying a young girl, mother in front. There is the sound of a radio advert, an incessant monologue reporting the arrival of none other than 'McJimray's Globomart'.

A teenager on a side of street carrying a box of confectionary intended for sale. An older adolescent a street over staggering with his girlfriend and cousin, shuffling between hugging and fending the others off. A middle-aged woman returns from work, already suspicious of her father-in-law's seemingly guilty movements and utterances. A high school principal in his office, an unusual rigidity in his face and body - an attack from within leaves him disoriented, reclining in the padded chair, his hands not responding to the normal cues.

Filtering to the top, themes of indifference and misunderstanding, through a torrent of risk-taking and the confluence of guilt. These are complex calculations, but it is of utmost importance to learn when and where to take appropriate risks. McJimray's is awaiting the evidence to support making this decision.

This is a puzzling suburb with its timeless conflicts, individuals bouncing off each other in a game of simple needs, a thread of interwoven histories which should resemble a well-crafted rope. Instead this rope languishes in the water, matting and fraying, harbouring ill-will. Still, there is no history more important than the illusion each individual creates in their mind, or what they project as their mind, currently reduced to data and copyrighted, owned by the McJimray's Corporation.

Powerfully distracting essences, each a drop in the bucket.

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ANDY BODINE
or
‘THE GATE OF THE
MYSTIC FEMALE’

One such drop in the bucket walks with backpack, traverses uneven pavement in a daydream, thoughts of home starting to erase the uncomfortable experience of a long-haul flight and his passing through customs.

Andy Bodine had daydreamed through much of the formal aspects of his flight from the motherland. The emergency procedures, and every announcement, including the air hostess’ explanation of the Welcome to Aotearoa arrival card, came and went in one ear and out the other, like his mother used to say - of course, she was British and used every saying as if the rest of the world knew exactly what she meant. He could forgive it now, wanting only to hear her voice, even if it meant hearing, ‘The prodigal son returns.’

Like the origins of her sayings and clichés, and with little genuine interest, he had mused on the origin of his own country’s name on his return: this New Zealand, but a different Zealand than the Zealand of Denmark. He had mused so long on the topic, debating whether he fully understood what ‘zeal’ actually was, that as he reached the arrival gate he may have been the only one off the plane to not understand the difference between ‘Tauīwi’ and ‘Manuhiri’.

Falling victim to his distraction, a completely random question caught him off-guard.

‘Is this your only passport?’

‘Yes?’

‘You go to the udda gate,’ was all the official said, knowing this would be enough for most short-sighted people.

‘But I’m Kiwi. My passport...’

The official slid the passport into his hand and threw it under the desk, saying, ‘Passport revoked.’

Andy didn’t consider the passport to be just any old thing, it was a souvenir of years of transient and self-directed living and learning, not that he would say these words out loud. Without the stamps there was no record of his travels other than in his head. ‘Can I have my passport back please?’

‘Go to the udda gate.’

‘My passport?’

‘Passport’s at the udda gate.’

‘Oh,’ Andy understood, the words at least but not the meaning. He moved backwards, ready to apologise to those he had kept waiting, but found that there was nobody in the line for this or the other arrival gates to his left reserved for Tangata Whenua, citizens of Aotearoa. To his right was the single gate for visitors and Tauwiwi, and the line was so long he would have to follow it back out into the corridor.

Eventually he came to the desk and was again asked to provide his passport.

‘You have it.’

‘I have what?’

‘My passport.’

‘You are meant to have your passport ready before you come to the desk. Move aside please. Next.’

The middle-aged woman behind the desk would have to be more short-sighted than him, he thought, as he was clearly more Kiwi than others in the line. He waited for another visitor to advance to the desk and then pushed back into the line and stepped up to the desk.

‘What’s a Tauwiwi?’

The woman stared through him blankly and then over to her colleague, who made such subtle movements of his head that it was debateable whether any human could tell them apart from nervous twitches.

She looked nervous herself as she spoke. ‘You’ve been away a while, haven’t you? You don’t have a Tauwiwi passport?’

Andy would make no attempt to answer. Instead he appealed to the whites of her eyes, studying not the actions but the threat of actions as if she expected some kind of emotional outburst. The colleague had called for security and they arrived within the minute, one chewing gum so violently he looked possessed by some malignant demon.

Doubting now the reality he felt he had a good grip on, Andy pulled his chin into his neck. The other security officer gestured and said, ‘This way, bro’. In his

panicked thoughts he questioned what it was he had done, pleading deep into his reservoir of guilt and resentment, as if there was some crime against his country he had forgotten about. A red and black emblem on the officer's jacket read 'Maori Warden'. As the man swiped his card and led him through the doors, it was his grip on the welcoming sense of home that now began to slip.

The last time he had seen anyone so serious and intimidating was watching the war dance performed at the memorial on the Gelibolu peninsula. It was a proud moment, with the other Kiwis, who made up the minority of the travellers. There was something personal and unmistakable about this dance each boy was forced to learn at a young age, and also something which made him feel unprepared or illegitimate. He had long since forgotten the words, the translation, and the actions, but he knew, and felt, the spirit of it no less even if he could not participate.

There was a lot to feel guilty about, but the birthright of an overseas experience, extended as it was, could not be the reason. Now in an empty office, with the voices echoing down the hall he felt uneasy, a caged victim to all his mind could inflict.

Anita Putin, a wiry woman whose uniform and pulled back blonde hair made her look shrunken, saved him from whatever torment he was putting himself through. She entered and introduced herself without a handshake, proceeding to connect with Andy with paperwork alone by slipping the forms across the table and reserved the condensed account of recent history until he had found that cryptic word 'Tauwiwi' again on the page before him.

'While you've been away there has been a restructuring of the government, resulting in a redefinition of the nation. You are now entering Aotearoa and there is an explicit re-identification of all citizens. Two main groups, those that came first, the Tangata Whenua, and those that came after the first, the Tauwiwi...' Anita paused to recheck her definition and then repeated as if she may have made a mistake, 'Those that came first, and, yes, those that came after the first.'

'The second?'

'The other.'

'I'm the other?'

'Others that are not the first.'

'I was born here - I didn't come here at all. My mother came here. She may not be the first, but I was born here.'

'Not first-born. First to arrive.'

'So citizenship is based on the order in which your race historically arrived in the country?'

'Ethnicity.'

‘How is that different?’

‘It’s a...thing they tell us to say - when you say race, people think racist. Ethnicity as a word doesn’t have that problem.’

She made eye contact for the first time and Andy could tell the rehearsed speech was over. Instead now she fought to stay serious given that she felt she was in good company, someone who wanted to define the redefinition of the nation along with her, at least in words. She read him wrong however and it was time to lead the conversation toward its bitter end.

‘Actually, you are less than that. Technically you fall into a third category as you have come after the changes. Unlike Tauwiwi, those that came after the first, you technically came after the first, and then left, and then came back.’

‘What does that make me?’

‘We don’t have a word for that. But if you sign these papers you will be a conditional Tauwiwi.’

‘But...but...conditional? What is the condition?’

‘That you assimilate successfully with the Tauwiwi.’ In the same breath she dug a pen out of her pocket and refocused his attention on the paperwork. ‘It is a simple process...’

‘But...but what does it mean to be Tauwiwi?’

Here both of the individuals stared blankly at each other, skin as white as the walls around them, and identity as translucent as the glass in the small, insignificant windows. It was also clear that Anita could not help him with this query no matter how he tried to dig for information, not that she thought it was her job to answer the question at all.

‘I mean, is there...a guide?’

He entered the letters of his name and intended address into the white boxes and signed skimming over the meaningless sentences. Of course there was no guide - it was implicit and generally unspoken between Tauwiwi that the term gave you a status on paper but felt like it took so much more - and Anita could only hand over her business card instead, stating robotically, ‘If you have any more questions concerning your new definition and the progress of your status, you can call me on this number.’

Andy looked at the card and back at Anita. ‘Do I get my passport back?’

She smiled sweetly, pausing in a considerate pose, and then replied softly, ‘No.’

There had seemed to be no visible change as he rode the buses to his old suburb. Perhaps the corner stores were a little more rundown - a bit of graffiti here and there - and more litter on the streets, piles of leaves half-concealed nappies and dead cats in the gutters. Like taking trains through the continent of

his ancestors, there was little to distinguish between nationalities at the borders of each country, their faces and lifestyles blended seamlessly. In fact the languages blended in a way borders could never limit. Recipes were borrowed, ingredients added or removed, products and services floated wherever they were needed, and of all the surprises there were no stops between most countries - no stamps on the passport page at all.

Now, the sense that he was not coming home became absurd to him. He walked from the bus-stop the same way he did years before to the same driveway and to the same gate, only now he was under the weight of his only belongings. This was the family home deep in South Auckland. He pulled the heavy gate closed wondering where Toby the old family dog would be, feeling the excitement of the return more than the aching back or the itchy sweaty skin. Still smiling through the discomfort, he took the first step up to the front door and saw a black blur just at the periphery of his vision.

The indication that things were not as they seemed came with a Bullmastiff bite to his butt cheek. The shock sent him flying up the steps just as the front door opened. Andy fell inside where a Polynesian woman both whisked at the dog to stop it entering and whisked at Andy for entering. He felt only a second of injustice while the numb butt cheek began to send pain signals to a distracted brain. There was not just the sight of the Polynesian woman to confuse him, but he had fallen on a tapa cloth and through a pile of slip-on shoes, none of which clearly were his mother's taste.

'What are you doing here?' She asked when she realised the weight of his backpack had pinned him successfully to the carpet.

Andy repeated the question back to her, but knew from the smell of meat cooking and the abundance of kids, some clinging in fear to the couch cushions, that he should change his tune quickly and explained, 'I...used to live here, and I might have glossed over a few emails in the past years.'

'What about gloss?' She asked angrily, slowly understanding who he was. 'Eh, you're Sister Bodine's son!'

With Andy pushing and Rosana pulling they righted the backpack together. There was an awkward sigh and hug while Andy pretended to remember her. He tried to resist having the backpack taken off him, but she insisted that he relax and take a seat with overjoyed Christian pity for the traveller.

'I can't,' Andy said, struggling not to grimace.

'Sit down,' she said, taking longer to announce more angrily than joyfully.

'No, I can't.'

Rosana put her hands on her hips. 'You will sit, and eat some food, and then we look at finding Sister Bodine's number.'

‘I can’t sit down,’ he said interrupting with a trickle of blood slowly making tracks through the hair on the back of his leg, visible only to the kids.

One leapt off the couch and pulled at her arm, half covering her mouth and whispering, but only for the first few words, ‘He’s got a bite on his bum!’

MIRIAM

‘Where can you go to find, well, just about everything? Where can you disappear into a world of wonder, surrounded by all the things you’ve only dreamed of, and find that they are all on sale? McJimray’s Globomart of course - one very special shopping experience. In 2199 one coastal town will be lucky enough to host this gigantic sale, but remember anyone in Aotearoa can get the experience by passing through the McJimray’s travelling transporter. Search McJimray’s to check the itinerary and get your ticket for the transporter today!’

Soundwaves bounce around the car while mother swerves and sighs. Miriam, feeling like a prisoner, is limp in the backseat letting the seat belt hold her up.

‘I want to go...’ It had been said before. The words weren’t important. This time she acted as if she barely had the strength to speak and the emotions begin to build up just enough. She knows what the answer will be but for some reason mother is being particularly patient.

She picks her words thoughtfully, ‘The tickets are very expensive.’

‘No they’re not – Dad says they’re not.’

‘He would say that to get us all out of the house. Well, not the tickets then, but just the getting there. There’s parking, and then waiting in line at the shopping centre. They’ll be so many people.’

‘I don’t mind.’

Mother flashes her eyes at Miriam. Mother would like it to be Miriam that didn’t like crowds but that is not true. Sometimes she wonders if she should just placate her mother and pretend she feels the same way, but this is too exciting an experience. Miriam pushes herself to the window so mother can’t see her and tries to build up the same feeling of injustice which resulted in tears only ten minutes ago. There is nothing left to force these tears - not even the fact that her older brother and sister were able to go last time when she was too young - so she gives up and sighs, making a point to sigh just like mother did when

whatever was supposed to happen at Little Monkeys Adventure Playland Café didn't end up happening.

Just as the car pulls up at the intersection, Miriam sees a boy walking down the road with a box in his hands and in an instant has made the decision to do the fingers at him, something she has never done. Mother is busy looking for a chance to pull out but swears under her breath and stamps on the brake.

It was as if there was a magnetic pull turning the boy's head at that exact moment and Miriam couldn't retract the hand soon enough. His eyes went wild and hers would be equally large. She instantly regretted the gesture, but then regretted more that she didn't feel powerful enough to keep the finger up in the air. Now she felt guilty and angry that the boy was so quick to anger.

She slumped in the seat and hoped the car would pull away. Mother must have been delaying on purpose. A second later she looked over the backseat and the boy was approaching, calling out with every second word in language Miriam was never allowed to use. She only wanted to take her anger out on someone, not even sure why it needed to be done, and all she could think of was the boy catching up and telling her mother what she did.

Her thoughts faded with the fear: her preoccupation with McJimray's, her own personal injustice, the confusing memory of mother's looking for someone and checking her phone incessantly at Little Monkey's - she suddenly wanted to agree, say yes or no as mother wished just to get through this without getting in trouble. She hid and closed her eyes, pleading in her mind, but a loud crack and a series of smaller clattering sounds woke her from her prayers.

'What the...? What was that!?' Mother used the language Miriam was not allowed to use and focused on pulling out safely, stepping hard on the accelerator. It was a few seconds before she gathered her thoughts and angled her head to Miriam with her face all screwed up and confused. 'Why did that boy just throw a bag of Jaffas at the car?'

'I don't know,' a red-faced Miriam said using a rehearsed tone. She looked back at the corner where the boy stood. Although in the distance now, he did the fingers back with more conviction than Miriam could ever have.

Mother was torn between asking further questions and focusing on getting out of this suburb without another incident. She had a clear dislike for these streets particularly as the rundown exteriors and overgrown yards made driving to their house feel creepy. All she could do was mumble something about the Polynesian boy as if she knew him but kept the comment to herself.

Shuffling over, Miriam anticipated the questions and with a breathy voice close to a whisper said, 'Mum, I don't mind not going to Jimrays' as if to secretly punish herself.

Now her mother took the time to find her in the rear view mirror trying to work out what happened to change her mind. She may have even considered that her daughter had somehow learnt reverse psychology. Mother nodded, seeing Miriam sit back in silence, accepting the change in mind.

Within the week she would purchase tickets for the travelling transporter, the gateway to the Globomart, for the whole family. There would be a variety of reasons why she made the decision, but she would not share these with Miriam. The city was already a complicated enough place to grow up in.

ANDRE AND ANDY

Andre had grown into a proud man - no more the skinny kid and no more the fat teenager. He didn't care so much that he had failed at becoming a mechanic or that the only entry level job at the scrap yard was in X block, and that meant draining the oil out of engines and crushing rims in a medieval-like guillotine machine, but he did care about his appearance. At the end of the day he could think of nothing more than cleaning the layer of oil and grime from his body as soon as he returned home, even if it meant ignoring everybody in an exhausted walk of shame to the bathroom.

When he stood at the front steps and Crusher was there at the top with his snout jammed up against the door he cared little about the reason. He just wanted to get past. He ambled up the stairs telling the dog to move, which it did not, and turned his key in the lock. Crusher's head squeezed through the door and Andre heard his aunty yelling at the top of her lungs for both of them to stop. He awkwardly fought to get in front of the dog only to have Rosana block his way also.

Trying not to get oil on the paint he squeezed through, all six foot of him, and found a bare white ass glaring in the dim lounge. 'Hey, what is...' he began to ask seeing that the strange ass belonged to a long-haired white guy lying on his front with his shorts around his knees.

'Just cleaning it up,' Rosana explained.

Andre recoiled. 'Wha-at?'

'The wound Andre,' Andy yelled, completely prone.

He walked slowly around his aunty expecting to see a meter reader or mailman, but instead thought the victim looked like his old church mate who he had walked to school with every morning, and who had disappeared off the face of the planet after high school.

'Is that you, Andy?' Andre couldn't believe it and just crouched and stared at his face. 'That's nothing you realise - that bite,' he said getting on his knees, on

the same level as Andy. 'You should be more worried about what the fleas in the couch are going to do to your balls.'

'Rosana told me to expect you home. I've been trying to get my pants on for an hour at least.'

'Nah, keep them off. Why not? It's funny.' The big man then sat on the flax mat, suddenly not caring about the grease and dirt all over him. He shook his head, smiling. 'Always wondered what happened to you. Your mum said you went around the world...obviously not in style.'

'And how about you? You didn't go far, did you?'

'Around the corner.' He laughed it off. 'Got a nice pool now though.'

'Moving up in the world. It is a nice pool.'

'Yeah, nah, moving up? The rest of the street just moved down, that's all.'

Rosana abruptly yelled, 'There you go,' and slapped Andy on the other undressed cheek. 'You can pull your pants up now.' She called out to the kids, letting them back in, and busied herself with finding a phone number.

Andre wiped his nose, saying, 'Yeah, it's a nice pool alright. Where did your parents move?'

Andy pulled his shorts over himself and sat, pushing the hair around his ears after shaking his head.

Rosana called out from the kitchen, 'House bus.'

Andre sniffed and looked at Andy, smiling with bright white teeth. 'Aw yeah. House bus.'

Although Andy had no idea what he thought about it, this being the first he had heard about a house bus, knowing for most around here it would seem like a poor substitute for a four bedroom house with double garage and pool. Transient living had been his thing for so long, even too long, that he was only able to laugh to himself at how ridiculous it was that his parents were now technically homeless and floating around the country like he had around the world. There was no way his father had moved a garage full of junk into a house bus, no matter how little room his mother needed for herself.

Rosana woke Andy out of his daydream. 'The number won't connect. Maybe out of range. We'll try again later. It's getting late. You can stay the night.'

'What? In the kids' room?' Andre joked. He looked at Andy and said, 'Plenty of room in there.'

'No, in your room.'

'Argh, what do I pay rent for if...?'

'Which room is that?' Andy asked.

'End of the hall,' Andre said through a sigh.

'My old room.'

Andy said that he appreciated the offer, but if he could have refused he would have. The alternatives were too much for him to bear. He didn't mind explaining to Rosana that he barely had a few dollars left; to explain that to his old high school friends would be shameful. Right now being poverty-stricken was secondary to his homelessness. He held onto the growing frustration only taking a glance at the tiny room he used to call his own as Andre dragged the overstuffed backpack down the corridor.

Unlike the rest of the house the garage had not been taken over, and was in fact still full of his father's junk. He looked around at the walls covered with tools, at the ceiling space storing building materials, and the mountain of boxes where the car used to be parked. It was a museum, or at least a museum's storeroom, and yet out of thin air Andre and the kids pulled mattress, cushions, pillows and bedding which they transferred to Andre's room while the boys talked.

Andre sent the kids back into the house and dusted off an old case while he spoke. 'Sorry the dog bit you.'

'Payback really.'

The big man thought for a moment, smiling bashfully, and remembered, 'Aw yeah.'

'Yeah, our dog didn't like you either. Didn't like anybody in this neighbourhood. The bitch.'

'The bitch,' Andre echoed with a nervous laugh.

Everywhere Andy looked there was some object with a vivid memory stamped on it. 'So he just left it all here? All his stuff?'

'And your stuff probably.'

'No, I saw to that. What is that?'

The locks on the case clicked open and Andre pulled his old saxophone out. He slung it over his neck and cycled through all the keys.

'I remember that,' Andy said as mesmerised as he always was by the shiny curves of the instrument. In school he had wanted to play the saxophone too, he would even have settled for trumpet, but all that was left in the music department's storage room was a tuba.

A deafening squeak came out of the thing and Andre coughed, asking, 'Remember that?' He gave up, knowing the reed was too old and worn.

'You've still got it.' Andy consoled him. He had given up tuba lessons within the year - long enough for some painful jam sessions with Andre, but too long carrying the ridiculous case around. Guitar had taken over his attention, but even that didn't last long.

'Thanks,' said Andre, putting the instrument away.

‘No, I mean at least you’ve still got your sax.’

‘Yeah, probably should have returned it.’

‘Oh, yeah. No, my mum bought me my guitar and I didn’t know what to do with it before I left - it ended up broken into pieces and stuffed into a trash bag.’ Andy stared off at the workbench still littered with old tools. ‘I couldn’t give it away.’

‘Sentimental.’

‘No, it was Chinese, a copy and less than worthless. Still, mum meant well.’

‘Mums are good like that, eh. Dad couldn’t give a stuff what I played. He thought the saxophone was a gay instrument...of course. I said “E Street Band, dad” and he was all “who?”. “The Boss, dad”. But all we learnt was brass band music - Sousa, stink old Sousa.’

‘Sousa,’ Andy echoed with a hint of derision, even though he secretly felt the marches were as complicated as he could handle.

‘I learned Baker St after high school - played it a few times with a covers band.’

They both hummed it to make sure they were on the same page.

‘Damn that’s an old song. That’s cool, man.’ While Andre continued into the chorus Andy took a chisel in one hand and gouged at the workbench and then looked him over, ‘You a mechanic? Like your old man?’

This stopped the big man in his solo, still moving to the beat. He shook his head, awkwardly uttering, ‘Nah,’ quickly and changed the subject, closing the locks on the saxophone case. ‘You still playing...anything? Huh, Boss?’

‘Nah.’

‘Come on, let’s steal some fried bread from the kitchen before dinner.’

Andy put the chisel down and followed him out.

Rosana caught them outside the kitchen. ‘Can’t get through to your parents, sorry Andy. Eh, Andre, you should get him a job where you work. You could stay here and go to work with Andre.’

‘Oh...thanks. Where do you work?’

‘Nowhere,’ Andre said, waving her away, but she came back stronger.

‘There is some mail for you, too.’

‘Where’s nowhere?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he said, grabbing the mail and shoving it in Andy’s lap. He ignored the weight of the pile of letters. There was something that couldn’t be ignored in Rosana’s wide-eyed stare. A smile was being hid behind her hand.

She said, ‘Don’t worry about rent until you get started. Up to you though.’

‘What? What do you mean don’t worry about rent?’ Andre stood up now and pushed her back into the kitchen.

The voices faded away leaving Andy with his half-eaten fried bread, confusion, and letters, some of which were already opened. He pulled one letter out of its envelope and gazed at the text. The department of corrections had sent him reparation cheques while he was away.

He could recollect the burglary, which happened while renting a house a few streets away, but he couldn't recollect the amount of loss. As he piled up the cheques he remembered losing nothing much of value - just a few handed-down items which were in need of repair - and already he counted over a thousand dollars all from some tiny amount paid out of the thief's wages every week.

He stopped estimating and held the bundle close to him. A mixture of guilt and excitement had taken him over.

VILIAMI

Viliami hated walking door to door. It should have been a crime to make your child walk the streets for money. Not just because it was exhausting, but selling bags of chocolates or sweets in general was nothing but a risk. The primary school students sold household cleaning supplies so that they weren't picked on, or 'stocked', for their stock. Viliami kept one eye on every street corner and the other eye searched gates for beware signs.

In his teens now it seemed like it was always chocolates, and for some reason the more he walked the streets the fatter he got. He was old enough to know that it just doesn't make good business sense to do the 'one for you, one for me' thing. Some days after the long hours of selling it was the only reward he would accept and he certainly had long enough by himself to really think about his situation - it was as if thinking would make him want to eat more.

By himself he devised his own reward and kept this to himself. He had stopped eating his stock, resumed the long trips out to the richer streets, and braved the hot days no matter how uncomfortable the chaffing. This goal was going to help him lose weight and get something he wanted, not what his church and family wanted.

He knew now to choose his streets well to avoid the places where the assholes would be, visiting only the houses he had found success before.

After school and before dinner time, before aggressive working men got home, the younger kids would be hungrily climbing up their mothers to get to look in the box. It was worth carrying more stock in the hope of scoring those Polynesian homes where the plastic money would come out instead of single coins and they could clear you out in one transaction - only a fool would not be overprepared for these streets.

That was it really, the test: not being a fool. Viliami kept that thought in mind, standing guard next to his personal goal, his reward. He kept strong when the families he had hit before were not buying - it was true he was going over old

ground to the best spots in the hope of getting through the ten or more boxes he had stacked up in his room. With every Polynesian family that he had already cleaned out and with every Asian family that came to the door and bought nothing he felt his box grow heavier.

He had to keep his spirits up or else become depressed and turn to the drug again, cracking open a bag of chocolate-coated honeycomb, peanut clusters or coconut rough, and chocolate-coating his sorrows on the side of the road. Still, he told himself he would not be the fool - he would get his reward.

A car pulled up to the intersection with a cute, black-haired girl in the backseat. She was looking at him and Viliami kept his head to the side to make her think he wasn't looking. He sucked in his gut and repositioned the box higher on his chest. Then he realised she was giving him the finger.

Viliami couldn't help himself at first give her an evil stare but she just avoided it by turning around. He mumbled something to himself and then realised the car would pull away and he would miss his chance to put her right. No little girl should get away with making him feel like a fool. His mumble changed to a yell even though he could not pick the right words. A string of swear words and empty threats fell on deaf ears. So he dropped the box and pulled out a bag of Jaffas, immediately hurling them at the back of the car just as it started moving.

He congratulated himself by hooting and calling out. Little red balls rolled everywhere reminding him that he had only succeeded in wasting more of his stock. He felt the weight of his situation again before he'd even picked up his box.

Viliami started walking, keeping his nose up in the air as he looked around and ignored the Jaffas on the road. He passed a house that looked abandoned, and then visited a few houses where no one came to the door even though he could hear people inside. Some beware signs followed, other houses he just had to judge for himself by checking for droppings or old bones on the lawn. Properties with old cars in an overgrown yard were a no go - the people were usually worse than the dogs.

He finally found a house which looked promising although he couldn't tell if he was getting into the rich area or not. Taking a deep breath he fought the frustration which told him to just stop and go home. He used his anger, silencing questions of why the girl was so mean, why life was so hard, and left any other unhelpful thought behind.

'This time,' he said. 'Come on.'

Here someone actually came to the door pleased to see him, and with that instant reaction to visually devour the contents of the bags while sifting through

the box - he was sure to score. Viliami's patience grew thin though and he even felt like walking away as the old man couldn't make up his mind, at times mumbling with a weird ooh and aah, but producing no cash.

What should have been a good sign was the lady who came up behind the man, impatient to see what was going on - she should have been the bringer of a wallet or purse, she should have at least gone to see if there was a spare coin somewhere around the house - instead she pulled the man back, telling him, 'You know better than this. It's not for you.'

He backed off, still not communicating clearly, and Viliami backed off to, feeling as if he was part of a crime. She was already closing the door before he had lowered his arms from the height of the box, and she offered an unlikely explanation for her rudeness.

'I'm sorry, that junk is not welcome in our house. He's diabetic and finds it hard to say no. I would appreciate it if you didn't bother us in future.'

Viliami had already stopped listening. Once he knew there was no sale, no matter the reason, he was already concentrating on the next opportunity. What did he care if the man couldn't say no? If it was not for these types of people the youth of South Auckland would have to live off the kindness of their elders, who were not often kind, and certainly not kind enough to buy them a ticket to McJimray's.

The woman called him back and Viliami froze on the spot until he could see that she had money in her hand. 'What was it you were fundraising for?'

'OK, so it was supposed to be fifteen of us going, but really it will be more like three or four Mormon scouts who are going to Jamboree, that big scout camp?' He had explained it a dozen ways to what felt like hundreds of people. Now he decided there was no harm in being honest. 'But actually, I'm hoping they call it off and I can use the money to go to MJ's.'

Her nose shot up into the air and a pair of wrinkly eyes squinted while looking down at him. She did a dramatic astonishment routine, complete with fluttering eyelids while finding the right words. 'So, let me get this straight, you want to fundraise so that you can go to a jumped-up shopping mall?'

He used her question to air his thoughts, explaining, 'To be honest in our ward barely any of the others would keep at this. People always coming and going at home, stock disappearing, and money going missing - and most of the others don't even have a scout uniform or they don't like to wear it, and me, I take pride in what I wear, but I can barely fit mine anymore. So, I don't think the camp is going to happen, but why waste a good opportunity?'

'Right.' The woman understood but started folding the note. 'While your perseverance is astounding. I don't think this is an appropriate reason for seeking

charity from strangers. McJimray's? A good reward perhaps, but not a case for compassion.'

'OK,' Viliami said, staring blankly as if he didn't see the note in her hand and wasn't attached to it at all. He backed away, nodding.

'Yes, so, good luck,' she said, not meaning it in the slightest and screwing her face up instead of smiling politely.

Viliami tried to ignore the denial. She looked like a teacher from his school which was worse. He might have to see that ugly, twisted face again. Anyway, with half the words she said too unusual to try translating he carried on, still a little confused and only made it a few houses up the street before giving in to that too far from home kind of feeling. The streets wider, houses bigger and better cared for, but no kids in the yards, no toys scattered through the garden – it just didn't seem that people lived in these streets at all.

He turned back, trying not to stare in the windows of the unfriendly woman's house, but he couldn't stop himself from looking up the driveway as there was movement which caught his eye. The old man had slipped out the back door and was lurking up the driveway. Now he was gesturing to Viliami as if it was in the hope that he would come back.

When close enough Viliami whispered, 'Lucky for you I thought I'd swing past, just in case the old girl was gone. Might have to make you a special price.'

The weird man just pointed at the garage and started hobbling over there himself. When at the door he gestured again for Viliami to put the box on the bench and then pulled out a fifty dollar note.

'Aw, well they are four dollars,' Viliami wondered if it was the right thing to do increasing the price for the old man, but then other doubts like how to give the man change were causing him to choke on his words. 'How about I make a deal? Three for ten dollars, no, four for, six for...'

The note was pushed into his hand to shut him up and the box was shunted across the bench then hidden under a tarpaulin.

It should have been a moment of happily accepting charity, but Viliami found himself wondering if more should be made of this. He thought about suggesting that he'd come back at an agreed time or have some secret system for making these exchanges. He was waved out of the garage, knowing he should be quick about it.

It was weird enough that the old man said nothing, making noises he could not understand, and shuffled around as if he was disabled or something. In the glow of the good sale and without even the box to struggle home with, he punched the air as he walked and let the success raise his hopes.

'I'm going to MJs,' he sang as he passed by what had earlier seemed to be an

abandoned house, and was home to some other weird old man. Maybe not real old, but greying, balding, and sick-looking. The man was at his post-box on two very fake-looking fake legs. He had propped his crutches against the fence and was staring at Viliami who thought to himself that they must make better fake legs than that and if he had no legs that he'd get the best, most realistic legs that he could.

He looked straight ahead so he didn't have to look at the weird man and with this torrent of thoughts he had almost entirely forgotten about the other man, putting all his energy into keeping upbeat about the chances of him going to McJimray's.

However, some things stay with you, some memories, as if they have burnt a hole in the mind which cannot be repaired by any means - it is with you for life or until a bigger better memory burns a bigger hole. That is just how Viliami saw it anyway.

JOHN BENJAMIN

The DJ summed up for the radio audience, after another classic hit from the Dead Horses, 'He is the result of expensive surgeries and modifications, our oldest man alive. John, you were alive to see our fair city top one million, now you've lived to see it top three million - does Auckland still feel like home to you?'

John Benjamin leaned forward and with shaded eyes protected from the reflected light off the Grafton Bridge suicide barrier automatically answered, 'Always has, always will - fairest city of them all, et cetera.'

'You've released over one hundred albums, you've had over sixty number one hits, your songs have been with us for all time and will be with us for all time. The songsmith of many government campaigns...'

'In case I'd forgotten.'

'...what's next?'

With every movement John Benjamin felt he could not hide his age. The wig, sunglasses and scarf were chosen, but the wrinkles and the lack of expression were unmistakable - in comparison to everyone he met, he was old and so sublimely bitter.

'Oblivion.'

The DJ smiled, hiding the thousand decisions firing in her mind, looking for the angle with which to deflect and bounce this heavy proposition into the air.

John sensed this and played along. 'No, another facelift no doubt. The weight of expectation is pulling my features closer to the ground.'

'You are looking very well.'

'You should see when the glue starts to lose its stick. No, probably not a facelift - just the ears, nose and melanoma jobbie.'

A gesture from the engineer prompted a lift in the DJ's enthusiasm. John had a clear moment to wonder if they saw it at all, his immense age, or whether it was the effect of the dust jackets. Project a face with the marketing and get some

artist to try to keep the illusion going, forgetting which is the bigger illusion, the album cover or him. He wished they would accept his honesty, then at least he would be able to share some wisdom, but radio being what it was, and the sponsors being what they were...

‘Ladies and gentlemen, our second guest has arrived. I promised you a Channel Zero first and here it is.’

Into the studio walked a look-alike and John Benjamin cringed looking out at the bridge instead of at the man.

‘A great Channel Zero welcome goes out to...John Benjamin, Auckland’s own John Benjamin impersonator, and of course, number one fan.’

‘Of all time,’ the impersonator said sitting and pulling a pair of headphones over his ears.

John looked over the table. ‘You’re using my name now?’

‘It’s a franchise John, didn’t you hear?’

There was no answer and the DJ quickly assumed her assertive role. ‘Over the past fifty years - and for the sake of the audience I’ll refer to you as Benjamin - Benjamin has tried his best to keep up with John, New Zealand’s most successful rockstar. By the looks of things you seem to have succeeded.’

Benjamin had even chosen near enough the same ensemble, including a thin scarf and dark glasses. John resisted the urge to pull his hair to see if this too was a wig.

Benjamin replied, ‘I don’t know if success or failure comes into it. It is...the ultimate respect.’

John spluttered and neither impersonator nor DJ appeared to take notice.

Premeditating the swing back to John, Benjamin overstepped his bounds, ‘If I may...ask a question of John. To what do you owe your longevity?’

The rockstar answered plainly, ‘Nanobots mostly.’

The DJ interjected nodding, ‘They are more efficient than red blood cells, so they say on the docs.’

‘I know - I’m part of the club,’ Benjamin said as the DJ made a surprised head bob and looked for John’s reaction. ‘But I’m not asking about physical longevity - that is all common knowledge.’

John couldn’t help but talk over him. ‘You think you’ll replace me? Outlive me, you mean? What kind of leech...’

‘I’m interested, we’re all interested to know, what keeps you going?’

The rockstar banged his hands on the table, not quite fists but close to it, answering, ‘High spirits, and the Dead Horses. Next question.’

Outside the building the two came to a stop, both lighting up a cigarette. John turned to Benjamin, and Benjamin to John, saying, ‘Why won’t you let me die

you conceited prick!? Ever since you came along they've dug me back up again.'

'It's good for the brand isn't it - a bit of competition.'

'It's not about band competition you monkey. I'm the only original member left and now I'm not even original.'

'I didn't say band, I said brand.'

John went silent, unsure of what the difference meant now. He instead looked around and put his arms up. 'Listen to that: silence. How surprising, no one cares what you said.'

'Look, you know it's just a label thing. Let it go. Channel Zero has been on it as soon as I started dressing like you - what's the big drama now?'

'You do know none of this is real don't you?'

Benjamin looked a little heartbroken but also confused. 'We're both playing parts, John.'

'Not this!' John pulled at the impersonator's scarf and screamed although he barely raised his voice. 'This!' He gestured to himself now and stood as if expecting some kind of applause. 'None of me is real! They've replaced every part! And now you come along.'

'Look it's harmless competition John. You really think I could take anything away from your...I mean, nothing more than a bit of attention. I'm really not that obsessed - it's just...it worked.'

'I'll tell you what's working, whatever your name is, what's working is me, and I don't like it. Radio interviews, guest appearances, awards - the same old shit. I'd have happily given it all up decades ago if it wasn't for you.'

The impersonator remained quiet.

John wasn't finished. 'Now it's about competition...competition for me!'

'Well, I'm just being me John.'

'You're just being you?' The rockstar thought about this. 'All you are is stubborn.'

'Stubborn? You're practically saying you only want to stay alive to outlive me - how stubborn is that!?'

John thought for a moment and questioned if that was what he was saying. The thought that someone was actually listening to him fired him up. 'Now that is a competition.'

Benjamin was flustered. 'Well...may the best man win then.'

John threw his cigarette down and Benjamin his, both standing on their own with the stamp of a hard-soled boot, and looked at the other.

'Fancy a drink?' John asked.

Benjamin stared into space, not knowing if he should answer.

A mad roar signalled Round Two in the small, city bar. John returned from the bathroom with Benjamin under his arm, laughing loud and roughly. The audience of afternoon drinkers, and anyone else who had heard about the competition through word of mouth, gave their applause.

‘That brings back memories!’ The rockstar was yelling at the barman. ‘Opal Nera tastes just as good coming up as going down.’

‘Two for the price of one!’ Benjamin joined in.

John laughed again and formed his sentences poorly, stammering on every consonant. ‘You should have seen him - he almost flushed his false teeth!’

‘I heard yours rattling around too!’

There was a moment of near calm. John stared, blinking at the bowl on the bar where they had put their wallets - they had been thrown down like gauntlets, but more so they were a sign of commitment. In the folds of leather were the only forms of identification with the authority to tell them apart. ‘What’s next?’

There could have been one or two thoughts of concern among the bystanders. John was in no state to care and he was used to not caring having been in this state many, many times before.

Benjamin squinted, perhaps a little reserved, but played along well. ‘I can’t see. Barman, bring the top shelf closer! Ronrico?’

‘Rum? I’m no sailor...I’m the captain!’

‘Grappa?’

‘Made from twigs isn’t it?’

‘Meths?’

‘Now you’re talking! Barman, two shots of methylated spirits. Aah, they don’t have it.’

‘They don’t have it? What’s the next best thing?’

‘High spirits...Chartreuse!’

‘Yellow or green?’

‘Green! We’re not playing around here. This is for the championship.’

Two shots of green Chartreuse were poured as a news camera slipped into the bar.

John shook his head, winked at the camera, and then tried to focus on the liquid. ‘I remember it being greener than that.’

‘Perhaps that was you.’

‘Touché.’

‘French are oui?’

‘I learnt more French on the labels of bottles than I did in school, you Noilly Prat.’

‘That learning which is otherwise known as tertiary education?’

‘Actually, I did a responsible serving of alcohol course in Melbourne before the Dead Horses made it big.’ The rockstar took the shot glass in his hand and examined the contents. ‘It’s when I discovered Chartreuse VEP...vieillessement exceptionnellement prolongé...exceptionally prolonged aging.’

‘Meaning it ages well or you age well from drinking it?’

‘Both. To this day only two Carthusian monks ever know the secret recipe of herbs and spices. Since the 17th century it has been known as an elixir of long life.’

Benjamin was bewitched. ‘Now that’s good marketing - say it lasts a long time and everyone believes it will make them last a long time. It works though - the marketing. I’m sold.’ He shot the liquid back and asked for another, John following slowly preoccupied by the crowd outside.

He did not look at the other as he spoke trying to focus on a familiar face. ‘Do you play?’

‘Guitar? Yes.’ Benjamin answered promptly, trying to hold the drink down.

‘On stage, I mean.’

‘I play it. It’s never plugged in though - neither is the microphone for that matter,’ he said laughing to himself. ‘To be honest I couldn’t do justice to the songs if I played live.’

‘What are you in it for...if not to be heard?’ John asked with a cynical sneer.

The fresh, bright green elixir was in his hand again and he raised it high. ‘Immortality! Yourself?’

The familiar face pushed through the crowd aiming for John.

‘Quite the opposite I’ve found - self-destruction. Then it became profitable. I’m the lucky one I guess - outlasting the others. You’re a loner aren’t you? No girlfriend, no wife? You know what it’s like to be alone?’

‘Bliss?’

John slapped him on the back and turned away. ‘You’ve finally caught up with me.’

Benjamin could barely hear. He asked ‘Who? Me?’ but John was greeting the familiar face with a hug and introduced him to Benjamin as his lead guitarist’s great grandson.

The grandson explained, ‘Channel Zero just leaked this circus. I couldn’t stop it getting out.’

Benjamin offered his drink to the man, but John gestured it away saying, ‘He doesn’t need an elixir - he’s part of the undead army.’

He ignored the rockstar’s taunting. ‘What’s going on, John? You spent all this money to stay alive - now what? My granddad would be turning in his grave.’

‘You know what? This is a good thing for you. Get your face out there - get

some exposure.’ John pushed the man around the bar. ‘You should be on this side and we should be over here. That’s the way it should be - now we have an impartial referee. Give the man the bottle.’

The camera moved into position as the grandson tried to refuse, finding himself boxed in by other radio executives and journalists.

A deep rage was building under what might have seemed like a merry front. Seeing that the grandson refused to pour he took the bottle himself. An incomprehensible rumble was issuing from his mouth. He only became conscious of it when he had finished the difficult task of pouring the shots. ‘Haven’t got a clue have you? It’s about me, it’s all about me. But no,’ John rambled and realised he could almost be heard. ‘Just having a drink with myself. Smile for the cameras, John Benjamin.’

John gave the camera a rockstar pose and then slumped onto Benjamin in order to speak to him intimately. ‘Two men, one bottle. I’ve been dying for this moment. Bottoms up!’

John Benjamin woke in a hospital bed and after the initial effects of shock tried to recollect the steps that led up to that moment. Although it seemed obvious to him what he was trying to ask, it was a complex task trying to get information out of the staff. He had to accept that he wasn’t making himself clear. He never felt much like himself without his wig either so took to giving up prematurely, hiding in the sheets as much as possible.

A helpful nurse soon learnt that the other John Benjamin was critically ill following alcohol poisoning. In her words the alcohol had depressed his central nervous system to such a point that the life-sustaining functions of his body had stopped.

‘Has anyone come to see him?’

‘No, I don’t think he can be seen at present,’ the nurse said, while taking John’s blood pressure.

‘You couldn’t get me my things could you - my wallet? I feel a little uneasy without knowing where my belongings are.’

The nurse told him to hold on. She wasn’t quite aware what kind of decision was about to be made. On her return she looked unsure how to proceed. ‘This bag contains two wallets. Sorry, this doesn’t normally happen. If you tell me your...’

John interrupted as quickly as he could, saying, ‘Show me the bag.’ He checked the nurse’s reaction after sighting the wallets. ‘We’ll let fate decide. Just joking.’

‘I’d better update your details. Can I have it?’

‘Hold on.’ John checked the name on the driver’s license. Chris Ridge. He

then handed the wallet back without looking at her.

‘Chris Ridge, Thames Highway, Oamaru.’

‘Yep,’ John grumbled. ‘That’s me.’

The next day there was a crowd of reporters and cameras outside the hospital, and with the excruciating out-patient procedure he was in no mood to be pleasant. Amidst the confusion one reporter phrased her questions as if he was the impersonator. It brought a smile to his face and he turned to speak directly to her.

‘How did you guess it was me and not the real John Benjamin?’

She carried on questioning him while he contemplated how rough he must have looked. Inside he was glowing, feeling like his own clothes were suddenly a disguise. Every accessory was imbued with a new magic now the questions seemed directed at Chris Ridge. The performance was over.

‘All I can say is, it doesn’t look good for the man,’ he said to the crowd who fed off his words in a way he had never seen before and pushed him for more. ‘I’m not feeling too good myself.’

One after the other, reporters attempted to drag his thoughts and emotions out into the open, paraphrasing the questions over and over until they could see he was trying to get free.

The female reporter managed to be heard once more, ‘Considering the consequences, how do you feel after your run-in with the rockstar?’

He resisted showing any sign of compassion, not that he could muster a genuine emotion in his state and left them with a final comment, clearing his roughed-up throat and sighing with the characteristic infirmity of alcohol withdrawal. ‘Y’know what? I’m not much of a fan anymore.’

If it sounded like a cold thing to say, he didn’t care. It was true and even in the first hour of freedom under this new name he knew he could take back something of the last century which resembled control and freedom, starting with a long break from drinking.

After the death of the wigless, wrinkled body, they called John Benjamin, and immediately after the memorial service, Chris Ridge performed in his honour, saying it would be his last performance. He surprised the sound engineer both by demanding that he play his guitar and sing live, and by actually doing justice to the songs.

No one thought twice when he changed his clothing and hair style, and faded into the crowd, a dramatic shift for the impersonator who had inadvertently proved the rockstar’s ego was still alive and well. Even with the attention now off him, he still looked around as he was being watched, still expected people to notice the change in his appearance - still expecting people to care.

Gradually the loss of status gripped the late John Benjamin, almost as forcibly as the need to drink.

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ANDY AND ANDRE
AND DAVE
or
‘HIDING THE LIGHT
OF HIS
PROCEDURE’

Andy found out soon enough where Andre worked. The scrap-yard was always looking for workers, a major induction each Thursday meant that the big man could supply his old friend with a job within the week. Although the yard specialised in Hondas it was a metropolis in itself, stretching as far as any of the short-sighted newcomers could see. Most of them dwarfed by their oversized steel-capped boots and blue overalls, most short and skinny to begin with, could and would not venture past the first row of tyre cages.

Beyond the tyres, the scrapped bodies were irretrievable skeletons of little interest from decades past - any car worth its metal was meticulously denuded, gutted, and then crushed into a brick. The tour around the first few departments included the tyre bay, and demonstrated how quickly the high value items were removed and the carcasses moved on to another station, but left the rest of the metropolis to their imaginations.

For most newcomers, to get themselves to sleep each night, there were dreams of great staff discounts or the rumours that there was cheap gas up for grabs, but for Andy it was an undiscovered country, an experience of value in itself.

He would later witness the sabre-toothed engine-biter clamp cars and gut an engine bay like something from a prehistoric nightmare, while he puttered around the yard in a forklift to pick up wheels from Andre in X block. Moments like this, deep in a foreign landscape, were exhilarating - one didn't need to venture far from home for extraordinary sights.

Andre thought otherwise, as did the crew in the tyre bay who wheeled from shirking to working as their apathy and anger levels redlined. Andy in comparison was slow, but steady, the Eveready man light years beyond the others in maturity yet often just as naive.

Ofisa, who would charge around with his energy and then randomly sit idle, taking any opportunity to watch the other newcomers, like Jay who stacked tyres so high it took them to fall on him to realise when to stop; Ofisa would laugh like a maniac without helping and go back to pretending to hump the tyre while he stripped it from the rim like a madman, a routine that Andy would find never got old.

Jay however would end up demoted to Andre's department because the tyre bay was too complicated for him. When Andy realised he could do less and less without consequence, and disappear out to X block for ages like others had done, it was the effect of gravity on his character and not his own will. His morale followed the others also. He spent little time worrying if he was doing enough for the minimum wage, but no matter how he relaxed into laziness he always had one eye on who was coming, as if it proved he still cared.

Andre was covered from head to toe with oil and Andy for a moment felt sorry for him, asking, 'Isn't there an easier job?'

'You mean a harder job?'

'I mean a cleaner job.'

'I'm X block *supervisor* - I get paid more than you.'

'You supervise Jay?' Andy asked looking over at the odd-looking high school dropout, too unfit for the tyre bay.

At that moment Jay lifted a wheel up to the rim crusher, yelled and dropped the tyre on a tray of oil throwing its contents across the bay over Andre's back.

'Spider,' was all he said to explain.

'Yeah,' Andre sighed and looked back at Andy with signs of worry. 'They get pretty big out here.'

Andy stared at the big man, nodding. Andre was the man for the scrap-yard whether he liked it or not, with huge reach and power, but Jay...

'You need to supervise one person?'

Andre nodded. 'He smokes way too much weed. There's some old dude around here sometimes. I don't know his name. I think they call him Banjo, but

he, nah, I don't know if I'm his supervisor. Probably not.'

'Cool. So this is where the wheels go to die,' Andy remarked as he watched Jay send the guillotine down on a wheel pressing down so hard the steel rim bent on itself.

Jay released the wheel, separated the tyre and rim, threw them in the right cage and then looked for another wheel.

'That's not all.' Feeling the anticipation Andre spun around looking for something more exciting to show him. 'Well, they bring the real munched up wrecks down this back alley. We drain them and crush most of the steel rims. We send any alloys over to you.'

Andy nodded. The noise from the wheel crusher put him on edge.

'Where you work you miss the best part.' Andre stepped under a wreck on the hoist and undid a nut. A stream of black oil poured down his arm and he fumbled over a pan which had been welded to a stand. While it caught the bulk of the oil, Andre had his fair share on his arms and face. 'Cool, eh? Nah, I'm joking - that's not the best part. This is.'

Andy was pulled by Andre under the wreck and they stumbled over the gravel to the back of the shed. Andy didn't want to explain how surprised he was that in his own department, the tyre bay, by contrast was like working in an office cubicle compared to this. He had to say, 'I started the day banging lead weights off alloy rims into a bucket, but then the day really fired up when I got to relieve Ofisa and try and take low profile tyres off seventeen inch rims. Going back to banging lead weights was the best part of my day.'

'This is the best part,' Andre said as he showed Andy the box of pornographic magazines. 'We're the first ones to get into these wrecks so anything left in them is ours.'

X block was at least a five minute walk back to the staffroom, squashed to the side of the back entrance - the whole area was an old tar-sealed road barely discernible under the dirt and oil, and right at that moment a small convertible found its way down the alley. Andy had hoped to not be caught in such a situation but had not been concentrating on anything coming from that direction, not with a box of porn in front of him and Andre's mouth gaping and drooling.

'He's stopping.' Andy made himself look busy, but failed. 'Give me something to do.'

'Get out of here - I don't supervise you.'

'Andre, I look too clean to work here.'

'Move the forklift for him - he probably wants to get through.'

The man in the convertible yelled at them. They barely recognised the greeting and Andy rushed over to the forklift to reverse it between the car and

the bay. When he turned off the engine, Dave Armstrong spoke from the convertible with a strong accent that had confused them. Clearly American, he wondered out loud if he was in the right place. 'I'm looking for a place to scrap my car.'

'Go around to the front...' Andre started explaining but the magazines caught his eye again and he cared little to continue.

Andy finished, 'The front - the front entrance. They'll send a truck to pick it up.'

Jay yelled from across the bay, 'What type of car is...'

'Shut up Jay,' Andre said under his breath.

'I don't need my car picked up. It's already here.'

The blue overall-wearing trio looked around and Andy nodded to him, 'Well, good then. Where is it?'

'Here,' Dave answered still staring through his sunglasses, waiting for a reaction.

Jay piped up from the distance again, while the others thought about it, 'That's a XLR2 - we don't scrap Toyotas here.'

'Shut up Jay! He doesn't mean his convertible!' Andre threw an oil drain plug at him.

'Yeah I do,' The American said.

They all looked over the car now - paint still glowing red after so many years, boxy and ugly by their standards, but still an XLR2.

Dave continued, 'How much do you reckon it'll cost to put her in the compacter?'

'Cost?' Andy didn't know. He sat in the forklift wishing he could trade places with this crazy American, but there the man sat in his convertible willing to pay for its demise. 'You don't pay to have something like that crushed.'

'Well, I'm not interested in selling it. I wanna pay to put her out of service. We've had a great time together and now it's time to move on.' He looked around at the odd assortment of young men, possibly half his age and half his intelligence, and lit a cigarette proving just how much money he had. 'I'll make it worth your while.'

'It's not full of drugs is it?' Jay asked.

'Nope.'

'Damn,' he said losing interest.

'Jay, go to lunch,' Andre demanded.

'What? Eh? It's not even...'

'I'm your supervisor. Do as I say.'

'But it's not even time.'

‘It will be by the time you walk there.’

Dave, just some American stranger to them, was sweating uncomfortably on the leather seats. The sun baked through his fair hair onto a greasy tanned scalp. Yet, he remained calm and cool, particularly as he held the other two in palm of his hand and explained just how easy it would be. If they looked distracted he would change the topic of conversation and analysis some gesture or expression of theirs, appearing as if he could see right through them. His repetition of the word ‘potential’ irritated Andy, but Andre was willing to embrace it. To show them that he was not desperate he suggested to meet them there the next day. From his perspective guys like this could still be controlled, they just needed some time to go along with his demands. Anybody could be bought and anything was achievable if you put your mind to it.

He was certainly no stranger by the end of the conversation, waving as he backed the XLR2 away from them slowly, and with a low-end growl echoing off the corrugated iron walls which shook the two of them as if they were as light and insignificant as individual chunks of road metal.

On the bus ride home, Andre was buzzing. He hadn’t stopped thinking about it all day. ‘I’m gonna buy me a car with that money.’

‘Wo, hold on there, Andre. Nothing’s happened yet.’

The bus roared to accelerate then screeched wildly in a never-ending pattern of start and stop.

‘Nah, we made an agreement. And I’m gonna finally have the money for a car so I can stop taking this stupid bus.’

‘He gave us time to think about it - not think about what we’re going to do with the money.’

‘What’s to think about?’

The bus hit a kerb with just enough force to lift Andre off his seat and onto the side of Andy’s leg. Andy himself was resting his arms on the seat in front and smacked his chin as he began to explain. Whatever he had to say seemed unimportant after this close call.

‘See,’ Andre said. ‘What’s to think about?’

‘Think about how you might not have a job by the end of it.’

The thought was like a sour taste in his mouth and Andre was making no secret of what was going on in his mind. ‘You think they’d care?’

‘Yeah - I think they’d care.’

Andre shook his head. ‘I never get to do anything exciting. Always some reason why everything’s not a good idea. You’re probably right. That’s why you’re the smart one, eh? Spending all that time travelling around the world. You probably thought a lot before you did anything.’

Andy remained silent, rubbing his sore chin to check if the skin was broken. He looked at his hands after this and although he had cleaned them they were still oil-stained and greasy. Andre was hiding it well, but he was still covered with the grime he had collected over the day. He turned towards the window, lowering his head so he could actually see out.

‘Bet you did.’ Andre muttered to himself. ‘You don’t talk about it much though.’

That night Andy tried to keep to himself. There was no truth to what Andre had said but that didn’t mean he agreed. Still, it seemed as if he agreed and now it was going around his head as if it had been important to set Andre straight. He tried to get an early night, lying on Andre’s floor, but with the thoughts of moving on, using the money in his account to start out fresh somewhere, there was no sleep coming.

Andre spoke with his brother, against his better judgment, about what was making him so quiet. The last time he had been this quiet was after the funeral. Although Viliami knew it wasn’t serious, he didn’t like the way everyone pretended as if nothing was wrong, and he certainly wasn’t going to let Andre get away with keeping it to himself.

‘Really? I would do it. That would be me. I’d take it and the money, and just say I got rid of it, then I’d hoon all the way home and cruise the neighbourhood with the top down.’

‘Nah, we’ve got to crush it. That’s what the money’s for, to get rid of his car.’

‘Are their drugs in it?’

‘What? How old are you?’

‘Old enough to make my own money. I know how hard it is. Jobs suck.’

‘What job? Selling lollies?’ Andre smiled at his brother, but he couldn’t hide the look on his face.

‘It’s a job, and I would risk it for the right reason.’

‘Whatever. Nah, this is one I’ve just got to forget about. Keep to the program. Save and do it the hard way. That’s what dad would have done.’

Viliami slapped Andre on the shoulder and looked into his eyes. ‘Dad would be proud. You know, I respect you. I may just be selling door to door now, but one day I wanna be just like you.’

Andre shuffled where he sat, nodded and agreed, but Viliami slapped him harder.

‘Joking you dick. If I worked the hours you did I would make more money than you. Dad would think that was a joke, bro.’

Instead of punching him back, Andre tried to get his rage under control. He was stunned and wondered how he could use his words to make his younger

brother understand.

Viliami continued, 'Your way is all shit. The hard way. I suppose living here was the hard way too. Across the road from the gang headquarters was the hard way. Living with uncle, the hard way.'

Even with the extra weight Viliami bounced up like he was still a small boy, fuelled by a large dose of anger. Andre watched him shake his head as he walked down the hall. He got up painfully slow in comparison and paused at the door to the lounge. Hearing the voices coming from that room he then thought against going in.

Flipping on the light, Andre found that Andy had turned in early. He tried not to stand on him and then fell onto the bed, asking, 'You awake?'

'Yeah.' Andy didn't even take a second to answer.

'Sorry about that.'

'Don't worry. It's not your fault.'

Andre wondered when he was going to leave, not that it annoyed him having him around. He questioned why anyone would choose to remain here and then remembered he had no choice. 'You get through to your parents yet?'

'No, they must still be out of range. They sent a letter some time ago. Just arrived today.'

'A letter? Woah.'

'Oh it's not bad or anything. Well, not that bad.' Andy rolled over to face Andre and pulled the letter out from a pocket. 'It's handwritten from my mother. Welcome home... We've been travelling too, early retirement, freedom camping...'

'Uh, is that nude camping?'

Andy shook his head with a stern look. 'Then there is a really drawn out explanation of why this isn't their home anymore. How they felt more like migrants again. It goes on and on.'

'And?'

'They see living in South Auckland now as an extreme example of all that is wrong or misleading about that clean and green image of New Zealand.'

'Man, migrants suck. I mean, man, letters suck.'

'Yeah.' Andy put the letter away and relaxed, seeing that Andre had not been offended by his mother's words. 'I've been meaning to ask, what is all this Tauwi stuff about?'

'I dunno. I stay out of that politics stuff. I think my mum said it had something to do with Tangata Whenua being the people who came to the country first and then Tauwi is anyone who comes after.'

'Who came to this "country"? Like you mean New Zealand?'

‘Aotearoa.’

‘Oh, it was Aotearoa before? Like when the Tangata Whenua got here?’

‘I guess.’

‘Pretty sure its people who give the land the name.’

‘Well, now it’s Aotearoa.’

‘Because it was called that before or because everyone thought it was a good name now?’

‘Well, it’s a better name than New Zealand.’

‘And now I’m a Tauwiwi.’

‘And now we are Tauwiwi, bro.’

Andy stayed silent. He held an urge inside much like he had before he travelled, to get out of South Auckland as soon as possible and drop everything in order to do it. How Andre was feeling didn’t seem to factor into it.

‘So yeah, sorry again.’

‘About?’

‘You sleeping on the floor. Turning the lights on.’

‘Actually I’m totally used to it. The whole time I was away I lived in dorms. My last room had eight beds in it - that was small even for a dorm. The light was on almost all the time. I slept with my arm over my eyes.’

Andre smiled at Andy, his eyes and ears wide open. ‘Gee, that sounds cool.’

‘You get used to it.’

‘So you got used to that but you can’t get used to being a Tauwiwi?’ Andre joked.

‘That was temporary, man.’

‘For how long?’

‘A couple of years.’

Andre laughed out loud. ‘You’ve a funny idea of what temporary is?’

‘You don’t think two years is short?’

‘No, I’ve been living here for four years. After four days I knew I was stuck here.’

‘At any point things can change. Everything’s temporary.’

‘Nah, it’s permanent. Nothing changes. All the men are angry and drink too much. All the women are pushed around and talk too much. Everything’s meant to be the way it is - that’s all I know.’

‘What about being called Tauwiwi?’

‘Nothing changed. I must have always been Tauwiwi. Anyway, something cool must have happened overseas.’

Andy raised his eyebrows and settled on anything. ‘Gallipoli happened.’

After thinking for a second Andre shook his head. ‘I know Gallipoli

happened. We all get taught that at school. You really like to change the subject.'

'No, I mean Gallipoli for me. When I went there...'

'You went to Gallipoli? Hold on. Is that a place you can go to?'

'Yes! You're kidding me.'

'I don't know. I only know what they said in school.'

'That we were fighting our enemies and we lost. That the soldiers had to run onto the beach and climb steep cliffs while being shot at.'

'Yeah something like that.'

'Man, we didn't even learn that Turkey wasn't even our enemy. They were allies until the British said they were going to send ships to protect the main harbour, and then didn't. Then the Germans sent them ships so they became allies with them. So, they send all our troops to march to Istanbul because they forgot to send ships, and from the furthest place away you could imagine, and it's not even flat ground.'

'So wait, is this your story or what?'

Andy refocused, looking at Andre as if he had been somewhere else entirely. 'Shit yeah, it's my story!'

'Alright then.'

One hundred busloads of tourists from Australia and New Zealand swarmed the park. It was a below average turnout for Anzac celebrations. That morning and the night before was spent on Anzac Cove itself, a beautiful calm bite in a monotonous coast where clear water rippled over pebbles, perfect for lazy wading or for the little kids. Of course a tragedy had commenced at a point in time now centuries before which could never be forgotten by either side.

Andy had been shocked that the soldier who fought against the Anzac troops, and taken the initiative to lead others to reach a beneficial hilltop before the Anzac troops could reach it, was now and no doubt had been for a long time on the wall in every home and business in Istanbul. He did not know the name of the bravest risk-takers on the home side, but now he knew and would not forget the name of the soldier who won it for the opposition, a person who then led a nation to democracy, the father of the nation.

All because he decided to not do what he was told. Funny moral, Andy would often think, rebellious and courageous. There were few times in history where a combination like that led to immortalisation. Now surveying the small headstones of an Australian cemetery, some tiny and seemingly random patch hidden down the side of a hill, Andy felt like commemorating this idea.

A friend, who he met on the bus and would be friends with not even for the entirety of the trip, wondered out loud where the New Zealand graves were.

Andy and Gareth knew where the New Zealand memorial was, it was there they were supposed to be in just over an hour. The Australian service was underway, in greater number and with greater backing, with its tiered seating and manicured lawn; the New Zealand equivalent was a concrete spike which stood on a rise on a hill with a series of uneven paths and banks surrounding it, standing room only.

According to the map, or more accurately according to what the two of them could make of the map, the New Zealand cemetery was over a few hills straight ahead of them. All they needed to do was take a brisk walk through the same unforgiving hills as their forefathers and they could be back in time for the memorial. Both had travelled across the world, although they may not have meant to end up on the Gelibolu Peninsula orienteering for fun with strangers, so a simple idea like taking a walk through the bush was easily one-upped, talked up until they had another three people tagging along. All it took was ignorance beyond belief.

Gareth seemed like the outdoors type. He led the way until he was caught walking headlong and headstrong into a pit of thick vines. The vines were a challenge to Andy and Gareth, one challenge which they would stomp all over and leave in their wake, but an obstacle to the other three which inspired reconsideration. There was nothing in their goodbyes, see you at the memorial, that suggested they doubted what Andy and Gareth were doing was in fact possible. Neither of these two brave, young men were going to actually think about it, that was certain.

They punished their bodies for a good twenty minutes, getting used to the flora of the national park thorns and barbs, and emerged in a valley. This was the lowest point and before then stood the side of an average hill immediately blocking their passage. In their own ways they both thanked whatever cruel gods were watching over them that the hill had no substantial subcanopy, no trees at all. Andy took a few steps up the hill and fell on his hands. The ground had slid out from beneath him like beach sand.

Gareth again stormed off ahead, wobbly at first, and for both it appeared as if walking on sand was second nature. Neither considered what walking over a hill of sand would end up being like, not even when they left the cool shade for the dusty hot air nearest the summit. Gareth carried on a story of how he had got drunk in Greece and climbed an ancient ruin.

Keeping talking was exactly the distraction which saw them compete for first place in this endurance/ignorance race. Andy wanted to compare their walk to bid for the famous summit, or at least the first impression of the young soldiers who carried packs and heavy weaponry with them as they crunched over the

gravelly sand. He held on to this thought while the voice in the background tried to remember what ruin it was he had vandalised.

‘It doesn’t matter. So I thought what the hell, climb on up.’

‘What the hell,’ Andy echoed under his breath. A two thousand year old structure, several times older than the very earliest human endeavour in their own country. ‘Most of those ruins are just columns now. How did you manage that?’

Gareth laughed, ‘Jumping from column to column. I told you, I was drunk.’

If Andy good have made an entirely new contorted face that clearly was not caused by the brutal hike he would have, however Gareth did not seem to be the type to notice subtle expressions anyway.

‘You obviously lived through it. No convictions?’

‘Nah, lucky eh? You’ve gotta do it though. That’s what it’s all about.’

Andy thought for a moment, taking a moment to grab a small plant to steady himself. The stems were serrated, much like every other thing in the jungle they waded through, but he had not expected that even these bare hills grew nothing but inhospitable plants.

The slope was only getting steeper, the soil separating into gravel and dust with every step. Still not as bad as the troops had it, Andy thought as his boots dug in using the prickly plants as stepping stones. They had to be close and this had to lift their spirits.

Gareth waited for Andy who was bogged down in thoughts. He didn’t know this fellow adventurer. At some point he had to recognise the doubt which would make this adventure seem futile. He may have already reached that point and left it behind, opting for the high road in the tradition of proving something while punishing himself and others should they end up needing rescue.

This was after all an abject possibility and getting more real as the slope steepened. Each took their turn sliding down the face at this point, always with that summit appearing to be just a few more minutes climb away. Andy knew not to complain, not whine - they were both going through the same experience - but his legs began to wobble. He was first to go on all fours, embarrassed to begin with and then charged up the bank taking each thorny plant in his hand when absolutely necessary. Tumbling was not an option; how shameful would that be? And painful, as a secondary sensation.

Andy overtook Gareth who was finally taking his own rest, lost in whatever superficial thoughts that were coming to him. ‘This is what it’s all about, bro,’ Andy repeated, clambering now, knowing he was reaching the end of his good energy. If he started to burnout the fear might take over. He wasn’t going to let that happen, partner in some pointless undertaking. He pushed and pushed like a

crazed infant until Gareth took it as a challenge and galloped on all fours to catch up.

This their first hill among never-ending waves of such hills, undulating into the Autumn haze; this great hill swallowed them, egos and all, spitting them up on the insignificant summit. A welcome sight for two tight-lipped idiots was a gravel road at the top of hill. That's all Andy needed in order to relax, and know that he wasn't only halfway through the ordeal.

Forty five minutes in, it was clear that the New Zealand cemetery was only reachable by vehicle and most probably followed this road. 'I give in,' Andy said. 'Time to head back.'

'Probably a good idea.'

And you would know, Andy assassinated his partner, however much the thoughts could be turned equally on himself, you would know a good idea from bad. Isn't that what it was all about, using the distance from any meaningful authority figure to make as an adult all the mistakes you were never allowed to make as a child? He wondered what he had proven to himself - it certainly wasn't physical endurance or great orienteering prowess. How many people got lost on journeys like this, without having to traverse the Dardanelles with no food and barely any water, pretending the world was a playground where no one was watching?

At least he could say he did it. That was all. He could say how much of a fool he had been, he had the proof and it was irrefutable. Just one way to make himself look smaller so others would underestimate him until he was nothing at all, no value, no status, not even a ripple on their judicious minds.

Yet it would always made him feel uncomfortably superior. Even though he never meant to attend the dawn service at Anzac Cove, and never thought he'd be the one to join the other New Zealanders at the war memorial for the haka - he did it for himself and so then, sadly, without any close friends interested in sharing in the undefinable qualities of such felt experience, the story would only be for himself also. The experience of those travelling alone cannot be taken home.

At least for a few minutes Andre could share in it while Andy did his best to exaggerate it. He doubted that Andre would understand the personal connection and equally Andy would never understand the connection Andre had with his job. These seemingly insignificant examples of status, with their accepted benefits and faults, it was almost as if their identities were anchored by these invisible weights. There is no easy way to separate the individual from these aspects of themselves, and yet they so rarely openly share this experience.

That night Andre did share as much as Andy, that he was happy Andy had opened up to him about how he didn't want to sound superior because he had travelled. Andre didn't want to sound the same, or risk being labelled inferior just because he was proud of himself for trying hard to get and keep this job. His uncle, the closest role model, was not the subservient type. It meant a lot that Andre could provide a little for the household he ended up in, but also that he could be a role model to the smaller kids.

Andy knew what kind of role model he was, but kept that to himself. He guessed he didn't have as much to live up to and maybe, although he wouldn't say it to Andre, maybe Andre was trying to live up to something that didn't exist. For the night at least he could assume Andre's world was as real and important as his own.

Perhaps it is an exaggeration - there is a pleasant thought waiting to be discovered, only for those that take the time to think it. For every mind trying to peek inside another's, they can find this thought and maybe they are right or maybe they are the source of that thought and its only recipient.

ERANA RICHARDSON

‘Right.’ Erana rolled her ‘r’ aggressively and folded the note like she was slowly crushing the boy’s spirit with each movement. ‘While your perseverance is astounding. I don’t think this is an appropriate reason for seeking charity from strangers. McJimray’s? A good reward perhaps, but not a case for compassion.’

‘OK,’ He said, staring blankly as if he hadn’t seen the note in her hand.

‘Yes, so, good luck,’ she said, offering insincere encouragement for his pointless exercise.

She struggled for a moment with being so cold, but he had just offered confectionary to a diabetic and a shrewd old man at that. Erana Richardson had no time for this kind of thinking. She did her best to look after her husband and only had the time to throw something in the oven before heading back to the school.

She was down the drive and on her way in five minutes, after storming through her house leaving peace and order in her graceful wake. During the drive she forecast the attitudes of the students, structured the rehearsal, checked off her multiple mental lists and reapplied lipstick. It was a joy to have a singular vision, to have total control of a production, and to have once again inspired over one hundred students to do something only she believed was possible.

Then came those words spoken by the venerable Edwin Williams, echoing like out of the cavernous throat of the Ministry of Education, an assembly of euphemisms designed to sugar-coat the restructuring. She was being squeezed again, for the millionth time in her career, from Drama to English, with less and less of what she loved and more and more repetition, teaching the compulsory and depressing lessons to the lethargic slime of South Auckland.

It would be a saving grace if she had kept control of the scale of this production. The Stage Challenge entry was now closer to one hundred and fifty with the crew and staff included. It had been necessary to involve her protégé in a more leading role and of course there had been weeks when it all got too much.

Tristan Pavlov had done his best to gloss over the painfully slow handing over of the reigns, not just of the production but of the department, and Erana struggled to remember what had come first, her attempt to run away from her problems or was it the wolves working as a pack that had riled her so?

It was easiest to put on the brave face, after all she was a Drama teacher, she was the one that was supposed to be pulling the wool over their eyes.

‘And that is not to say I’m no wolf myself,’ she said, looking at herself in the rear view mirror, evoking her thoughts before they boiled over. ‘No sheep am I.’

She took her coat and stomped through the carpark to the office block and once there carried on to the hall, knowing that Sheryl would stop her for some admin question.

‘Can I have your final number, Erana?’ The woman’s provincial inflection pierced the air.

Erana halted and swept her coat around in a spin. ‘Oh yes, Sheryl,’ she promised and arrived at the window with her painted-on smile. ‘But what is the decision from our esteemed leader?’

Sheryl looked over the top of her glasses, so steely that Erana wondered if she saw anything at all. ‘Edwin says use your discretion.’

The Drama teacher gasped, and gestured for the form which was handed over once Sheryl’s vision had readjusted. When Erana herself had found the space where she was to write the amount of students receiving a special reward for their contribution to the production she performed a double-take.

‘Isn’t that...generous,’ she guessed looking at Sheryl for a confirmation. ‘McJimray’s? Tickets to visit McJimray’s?’ She nodded intermittently prompting a response of any kind.

The office lady agreed, ‘Yes, the kid’s love it – it’s more than a mall. And the tickets were heavily...’

‘Heavily discounted, I know. I couldn’t miss that on the radio. It’s a shopping mall, isn’t it? We’re sending the principal cast of our Stage Challenge production to McJimray’s?’

Sheryl nodded.

‘Just getting it straight in my head.’

‘It’s a generous reward.’

‘That’s what I said. It is generous.’

‘It is.’

‘Is he in?’

Erana caught her off guard. The office lady looked flustered for a moment, moved some papers around by accident as she swivelled in her seat, and then remembered, ‘Edwin’s out of sorts I think at the moment.’

‘OK, that’s fine. I’ll just fill in the acquisition form and be on my way,’ Erana spoke through her teeth and with another tired smile.

As she found the space again a bolt out of the blue shot through her. Without hesitation she wrote down the numbers one and five for the principal cast – which was certainly no indication of all of the greatest contributors – and then as if it was a full stop or exclamation mark wrote a bold zero to finish off.

The bolt turned to a nervous buzz that sizzled through her body right up the back of her neck. She smiled sincerely and hovered over Sheryl as if in some ecstatic state. With a silent affirmation and farewell she left her with the form and floated to the hall.

The rabble were collecting around Tristan near the stage. She greeted a few students and then hit Tristan with a priceless grin. Olly and Jazz, and Amy, Ash and Bernie, all seniors who knew not to fear Mrs Richardson’s icy frontage, were studying the two of them and their cheeky laughs.

In the back of Erana’s mind she understood the way they’d grown up and the surroundings were hugely different and not at all preferred, namely the way the school and its roll had changed over generations making life harder on genuinely happy young people.

While she felt this, she did not treat this little group of hard workers any different from those she saw as more aggressive, harder to work with, or for want of another difference, Tagata Pasefika or Tangata Whenua. Amy and Olly, and the rest, understood this, but they always strived harder, led to believe they were more privileged or at least had more potential.

Erana may have been guilty of spreading this belief. She may not have been born near this suburb, but she understood how stereotypes can be used to empower certain people. At her best and possibly her worst, she may have been blind to how they can disempower also. She didn’t have long left at the school - it had all got a little dark in her mind, and in her mind she was too old to change.

‘May as well go out with a bang.’

Tristan heard her double-meaning for sure. He would know that she had toyed with the idea of leaving. He may still have been shocked by her recent actions.

‘You know the bastard wouldn’t even come out to see me.’

They made efforts to organise the crew, asking them to take up positions. The seniors passed this on and moved about the group pulling them together. With so many students, it was a slow process. It gave Erana a moment to marvel at her creation. One hundred and fifty students involved in the Stage Challenge; one hundred and fifty taken out of class to dance and act out some age-old story of good versus evil, an epic battle.

Erana stood motionless in a Peter Pan stance, Tristan in comparison struggled with his pot belly to look as powerful. He leaned to Erana and laughed behind his hand, asking, 'What have we done?'

Just the anticipation of the coming rehearsal was enough to fill her with pride. She lived for these feelings. The power of a simple idea, amplified by over a hundred voices, wills with abundant energy, to aim high, to compete, to win. Erana took it all in, and broke character just a few seconds. 'Indeed, what have we done?'

‘I VALUE THE NURSING-MOTHER’

Andy turned the ignition off and took a deep breath. He pulled the screwdriver that was jammed into the ignition barrel, lifted it to his face and looked at it. Sweating in his overalls with fear and frustration he had made it to the address, but was unsure if he was in the right place. He had dodged police cars from Central to South Auckland, struggling to keep the beaten-up Cortina Nuevo alive, and now worried that he was in the wrong part of Auckland entirely. If he was caught like this, in his grubby overalls and with a screwdriver in his hands, and in this part of the city, he knew where he would end up.

It came to him that this was the site of the New Zealand Pavilion for a World Expo decades ago. A half-deconstructed tower behind the entrance block was a haunting memorial of a country hanging on to the best of its history as if it was merely a campaign. He walked through the ghost town to the only open door and a familiar figure crossed the gravel-strewn concrete square.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Anita said just as Andy began to say the same thing. ‘I have mornings at the airport and afternoons out here, and my lunch date didn’t show.’

‘Busy, busy,’ Andy mumbled, taking a short look at her and imagining the guy who stood her up. He explained his clothes and she acted as if she hadn’t noticed.

Anita was looking at a bus arriving at the gate cautiously and said, ‘We’d better be quick - the others are arriving.’

Through the windows a series of unhappy faces stared out from the bus. They were in their own worlds, listening to their own music, none engaging in any conversation. Andy gripped the screwdriver which was now buried deep in his pocket turning it around and around in his fingers, thinking he must be one of these people.

They paced through the darkened corridors. Old monitors flickering on and

off set in the walls, part of some audio-visual demonstration. Anita showed him a hidden office and took the paperwork he had promised her. She stood at the scanner and took peeks at his expressions.

Anita cleared her throat. 'Well, that's the first two steps towards becoming a citizen.'

Andy shuffled uncomfortably in the seat. 'Sharing a room and earning minimum wage?'

She ignored him and stopped recording the information he had given her, making eye contact properly. 'Unlike a lot of people in my position I have a high opinion of returning travellers. You're in the right hands.'

Hands that were soft, not for hard labour, yet wrinkled as if she was dehydrated.

'There are published articles that describe travellers as well-acquainted with autonomy, independence, adaptability, transience, and...multiculturalism.' She looked at him to see if there was a reaction to the word or any of the words for that matter. 'All of which are requirements of modern employment. In particular the concept of boundarylessness.'

'I had a job in a tyre bay in a scrapyard - how does boundarylessness work there?'

'Had?'

Andy froze and thought it best to be honest with her. Apart from the money in his account he had nothing else to lose. 'I may be presuming too much, but as the tyre bay burnt down today along with blocks A to G, I'm unsure whether I still have that job.'

Five minutes into lunchtime, giving the other workers time to desert their departments and walk like camels to the staffroom for refuelling, Dave pulled the convertible up to the compactor with Andre in the passenger seat. Andre hugged his arms still trying not to make greasy marks everywhere even though this was the death march for the perfectly reconditioned XLR2.

They were followed by Andy in the forklift. He crunched frustratingly slowly over the gravel drawing attention to their presence. Andre spied someone working in another section of the yard. To make matters worse, it was Banjo - just a weird old man maybe, but one who in the welding department between the walls of shipping containers was supervising the training of his new worker, Jay.

It had not been a great start to the day when some fellow workers had cruised by the two of them walking from the bus stop, yelling at the big losers for not having their own vehicles - that was how Andre saw it, while Andy was just ignoring the incomprehensible voices and wondering what his meeting later that

day would be like. Both in their own worlds, Andre's hidden angst had grown due to Andy's silence and he read his friend's mind, not surprised at realising that Andy would be planning on moving out, no doubt moving on and away. It hit him hard when Des, the manager, bluntly called out to Andre to notify him of Jay's move to Banjo's department, leaving Andre by himself to contemplate his stagnant state in the grubbiest, most inhospitable department in the scrapyard.

'OK, out!' He yelled at Andy, grabbing him and then pushing him out of the way. He leaned down with wide open eyes that darted across the gravel intersection more than they made eye contact. 'When I say, I want you to push the big green button, a'ight!'

Then while Dave and Andy could only watch him ranting to himself, he closed in on the convertible aiming the forks between the wheels. They couldn't know his shameless argument was with his absent father, and all the paranoia his mind could process was filtered through clenched teeth. 'Who's the big man now? Gonna live up to expectations now! Yeah, that's right...'

The forks hit the side panel of the car, tyres skidding across the gravel as the forklift came to a momentary halt. Andre coughed and lowered the forks, scraping down the paint work until they were jammed.

Again taking quick glimpses over at the distant department, he yelled back as if he needed reassurance, 'That's OK, eh? Of course that's OK. Nah forget it.'

Old Banjo was standing now, next to the car he was working on, gas torch in hand, flame still glowing blue, barely visible from the forklift.

'I got this, I got this!' He yelled over the engine, ignoring what he saw in the distance. He repositioned the forklift and the forks, advanced and lifted the convertible slightly as he angled the forks towards him. 'Come on baby!' Lifting fully now, one foot on the brake and the other jammed down on the accelerator, he waited until he could just see the crushing bed of the compactor and then released the brake.

Dave had only a second to kiss his hand and touch the side of the tyre, then retracted his blackened fingers slightly disgusted looking around to find something to wipe his hands with. Andy could only look at the man with a confused expression, thinking how ridiculous he looked. If he had known how Andre would have been affected by this mad man's money, turning him into a caricature of a drug-dealing pimp slobbering at the sight of it, he would have paid Andre out of his own pocket not to do it. But Dave being a committed man, who now switched between mourning and childish howling in excitement, would have just roped someone else into it - they both knew there was a long line of people just like them desperate enough to volunteer.

'Now!' Andre said, looking behind him and struggling to focus on old Banjo

handing the welding torch over to Jay and taking off his gloves.

With a roar the compactor slowly sandwiched the pristine sports car and then compressed it head to tail. The cube that was left was haemorrhaging petrol and oil, leaving a deep pool, and while Dave shrieked and looked for acknowledgment of this awesome moment for him, Andre could only think of downing tools and getting away.

‘Goodbye old friend,’ said Dave, celebrating with a cigarette, oblivious to the fire that puffed away in the distance behind him. ‘Now, can either of you two kind gentlemen give me a ride downtown?’

‘Did you see where Banjo went?’

Andy peeked over Dave’s head unable to answer and seeing only a plume of black smoke in the distance. Andre was already running over to Banjo’s department before Andy felt the concern.

Makeshift compartments housed in steel girder scaffolding sheltered chunks of wrecks, surrounded on either side by a ten metre high like wall of shipping containers. It did not appear that anything could catch fire in such a barren location, but as Andre met up with Banjo who now carried a fire extinguisher it could only be so. They all stood around helpless as the flames spread from a scrapped engine to the hidden wooden panels in the compartments.

There with the torch still in his hands was Jay, standing transfixed and almost smiling at the travelling flames.

Andy and Andre, low on adrenalin, failing to see any way that they could be of assistance, knew this fire was obviously going to attract attention. They looked at each other again, eyes wide open and minds empty. It was enough to make them feel that the walls were closing in on them.

Anita studied his body language, unsure of what to make of the situation. An echoing cry caught her attention, which Andy didn’t recognise as even human, and she swivelled to take an unemployment benefit form from a tray then slid it over to him. ‘You may need that then. I will just be about five to ten minutes,’ she said, changing her tone dramatically. ‘That gives you enough time to sit in on the immigration and employment seminar down the hall.’

In a whirlwind of blonde hair and flapping paperwork, Andy found himself ushered to the seminar room and joining a seated crowd of Asian, African and Polynesian faces. The already dim light faded out and Dog, from a resurrected version of a comic strip called Footrot Flats, bounced across the screen, projected from behind, out of synch with the audio and in all-round rough shape.

‘Welcome to our original land...’ The narration began as Andy lost interest and studied the others. Although Dog was friendly and entertaining, the majority

could not understand why they were watching a film about a dog instead of employment in Aotearoa. Some might have thought it suggested they'd be working on a farm which might have been why certain bodies squirmed uncomfortably, but then the dog bounced away and helicopter shots of waterfalls and mountain ranges soon clarified that they had indeed come to the paradise of their dreams.

Why does Dog keep saying 'original'? Andy wondered, clutching the form and growing impatient. He thought for a moment why Anita had changed so dramatically just to throw him in with these others. Was this really where he was supposed to be? Andy debated getting up, even lifting one leg a few times as if his body was leading the way, but he calmed himself.

After a few minutes of selling utopia, reality took the stage in the shape of a Polynesian male bursting out of his crisp suit and introducing himself as the Work and Income Aotearoa representative.

Oh...original. I've been missing the point - this land is something that came before...not something with a future. I'm not original, so...I'm not from this land.

He looked around again, wondering if the representative could see him sandwiched in between the foreign bodies with their white smiles. His dark grimace could hardly express his feelings of disjointedness.

The man said hello in a range of languages and then raged through the details. 'You must understand WIA only has access to less than 2% of the job market, but rest assured we will only place you in a job that is right for you.' Crisp and positive. 'Of course most of you have secured positions in our agricultural sector, and farming also. The likelihood of you all staying within the one sector you have chosen is, well, an unlikelihood, so this is just a procedural seminar, but one we assure will be of service to everyone...and so I'm going to run through some interview techniques and we'll be role-playing some basic scenarios...'

A voice a few chairs away asked a neighbour, 'Is this man Ab Origene?' stressing every syllable, while the boldly smiling man smothered them with his confidence as if he was all technique and no real human being.

Andy found it hard to believe this man had landed the job of *his* dreams. Telling other people how unlikely it was that a government led employment team could not really help. He then wondered if the man was instead just a projection, one of these holographic recordings or virtual spokespeople they use in advertising. If it was true he'd expect to see some kind of flattening of the body, perhaps seeing an edge, but the projector itself must have been floating somewhere inside the projection as it was as clear and three dimensional as any

living human being standing in front of you.

Either way he had heard enough, feeling nothing but the impulse to rebel. He stood and excused himself, but the man caught him.

‘Oh sorry, where are you going?’ He asked taking a few steps towards him.

‘I just have to see Anita,’ Andy answered a little intimidated. He then pulled at the fabric of his overalls and showed the man. ‘And I’ve got a job to get back to.’

The Polynesian man overshadowed him and stood on the brink of losing his temper. Andy put out his hand and the man took it, both thanking the other. The voice mumbled, ‘He must be Ab Origene.’

‘I’m not,’ the man said, losing interest in Andy. ‘And we don’t use that reference in Aotearoa, just for your information.’

Feeling better about leaving now that he had given an excuse Andy doubted his sanity for a moment while he reviewed the strange thoughts that led him to believing the man wasn’t real. As if the government had the money to waste on fancy holographic projections of WIA case workers doing presentations in dilapidated expo centre buildings.

He walked in the direction Anita had last been seen, and found his way outside only to find a strange, shrivelled woman smoking in the sun just outside the shadow of the building. The cigarette looked twice as long in the woman’s hand, jutting out like a smoking gun and sending a wave of intrusive smell to wash over him.

He refused to repress his frustration any longer, staring out at the wrecks of buildings in the distance and ranting, ‘Sure, clean and green, with affordable housing and fantastic job opportunities...a perfect little island chain in the pacific, free from corruption, poverty and...’

The woman stared at him, one arm holding the elbow of the other as the cigarette’s smoke trailed off on a diagonal. She smiled and proceeded to tell him in Russian to go rant somewhere else, then laughed and spoke in English, ‘Affordable, what does this word mean?’

‘Able to be afforded?’ Andy tried to ignore her interruption and threw more words in her wrinkled face. ‘Having enough money...’

‘You can’t have enough money. Nothing is affordable.’

‘That was my point. I was talking ironically.’

‘Saying the opposite instead of saying what you think? Must be effective. That must help you in your hunt for enough money.’

Andy wondered if she was just the type who liked to argue with young men, for sport perhaps. He began to jiggle on the spot in frustration and then blurted out, ‘I have enough money...to rent at least. That’s a start.’

‘Where have you been? You won’t be able to rent without a steady job. That’s why you’re here isn’t it?’

‘I have money.’

‘That is great. You have a little money. You’ll need it now that rent has almost doubled. But you get your foot in the door then they ask you for references, for an employer to verify your status. It can’t be contract work, it can’t be seasonal work - it must be real work, real status. Go back and live with your parents - that is only way. Go home.’

Andy backed away and looked back down the dark corridor to find the office door he was looking for, saying, ‘I left home, then they left home. I have no home.’

The woman shrugged and coughed, choking out the words, ‘Blame the housing market.’

Andy heard a noise in the first room echoing down the corridor. He readied his protest speech to Anita as the representative of this new order, pushed the door open, and laid eyes on the breast-feeding woman, a sight that took him a moment to adjust to - the open blouse, the disproportionately enlarged breast and a small bald head suckling away blocking the view of more pale exposed skin. The fire in his tirade immediately fizzled out as etiquette took over.

To pretend as if he wasn’t mesmerised by the open blouse, Andy produced a string of words that could only make sense to him and amounted to gibberish. ‘I think...I would be proud...to be *unoriginal*...’

‘What’s that?’ Anita asked, appearing to ignore the rude interruption, cradling her baby as if posing for a holy portrait. One loose hand worked independently from the rest of her body and tried to inconspicuously pull her collar across her chest.

Andy admitted his defeat, overcome by the sight of the bare breast and the small baby, finding that there was no way of arguing with a breast-feeding woman. He concentrated on her eyes which by now burnt holes through his own and barely heard her paraphrase her question again.

‘I hope you understand that the country has changed - I didn’t get a chance to say earlier and I’m sorry you had to sit through that seminar - but although change is hard,’ she said, pausing to help the baby latch again and reposition her arm, ‘To get used to, change is very hard to get used to, and even though...’ She paused again, finding her place in a paragraph she now read off the pamphlet on the desk, ‘Aotearoa still offers a standard of living most other countries cannot.’

He sat on the seat, if not only on the edge, staring back out the door having chosen not to be so naive to think she wanted him to leave, but still uncomfortable enough to remain rigid. He would have doubted Anita’s

humanness if she wasn't currently breast-feeding and could not help but relate to whatever human being was inside this apparent nationalist or even corporate clone, who could remain so centred on her job while virtually juggling.

'I've looked into...leaving. Perhaps back to Britain, although I've since learned that the fee for the Right of Abode has now doubled and seeing as my passport has been revoked what so-called lifelong Right of Abode I had has now also been revoked. So...I'm looking at my options.'

'I don't know that you have many options, Andy. Your own resident status is decided on whether you make a sufficient contribution to the state.'

'But I was born here.'

'So was I.'

The Russian woman appeared at the door. 'Ready to go?'

Anita reserved her most human attributes and motherly energy for a few seconds of bonding with her child, then the baby went back to the grandmother. Andy kept his eyes down not wanting to see those piercing old eyes or any of the awkward looks that were most certainly shooting in his direction.

When grandmother and baby were gone, and the blouse was seamlessly rebuttoned, Anita resumed her interview, taking control of the questioning. 'Do you think you've made a contribution since being back?'

'What happened!?' Andre yelled.

Banjo's gruff voice roared as he fumbled with the extinguisher. 'Engine caught on fire. Welding torch. Some idiot distracted me and I handed it over to that Chimpanzee.' The extinguisher did nothing and the old man gave up, throwing it at Jay who did not have a chance of catching it. 'Let's go. I wasn't here, and you weren't over there playing silly buggers with the compacter. You hearing me?'

'We weren't over there playing silly buggers!' Andre started trying to defend himself.

Andy jumped in, 'You're right. We weren't. Let's go.'

'Don't go out that way!' Banjo yelled as if he knew their thoughts. 'The petrol pump's down there connected to the overground tank.'

Andre remembered, 'We've got to...'

'Give Dave a lift? Are you really...'

The fire spread metres above their heads and blew towards them for a moment, long enough to force them to back away. Andre led, fixated on Dave who was still by the compacter.

'Suit yourself,' Banjo spat at them as he grabbed Jay and pushed him in the other direction.

Andy knew he couldn't argue with Andre, not when the money he was promised was still with Dave. Stomping over the gravel in their heavy gumboots, they passed the rickety shed stacked with 20L petrol cans, some empty and others waiting to be filled. Andy stopped and looked at the large plastic container that sat in the metal cage. It must have been the tank and looked unbearable full.

Directly beside the shed was more fodder for the fire, the yard Cortina Nuevo, beaten up beyond repair, excessively graffitied and living out its last days as the run-around car. Andy could see the dominoes waiting to fall. Dave on the other hand, who was still smoking his cigarette standing around waiting for his lift, unwittingly ashed into a pool of the XLR2's drained fluids just near his feet and commented, 'That's some fire, huh?'

Andre was still running towards the man, arms flailing like he was unable to stop, signalling to him to come away from the compactor and head for the back exit. On foot was not preferably for the American. In fact, moving at all was difficult as he had to finish his cigarette and the idea of tearing himself away from this manmade disaster was proving difficult.

'We've got to get out of here!' Andre bounced around Dave watching him smoke for a few seconds and then realising where the man stood. 'Hey, get out from that stuff!'

'You can't pay for this kind of sight,' Dave said in a dream.

'You're standing in petrol you crazy...'

A loud crash signalled the landing of the first car chunk falling through the scaffolding - there would be more, that was, if the scaffolding's foundations held out.

Dave carried on musing, 'Y'know, this car and any car I suppose, is like an ex-girlfriend. Once the relationship is over and you're not even standing in the afterglow, it's time to...put them in the compactor and walk away. But those fireworks over there...'

Andre could only see glowing smoke as he scanned the yard in a dizzy whirl.

'...that's what I want.'

Andre reeled, not only because the alarm would go at any minute, but because this American couldn't pull himself away from the destruction. He grabbed Dave without a word, pulling him away from the compactor. The banged-up Cortina reversed into view, boot up in the air and on closer inspection loaded with plastic fuel containers.

Andy, sufficiently proud of his discovery, yelled for them to hurry up and revved the engine impatiently, then realised the boot was blocking his rear-view. Emotionless and violently nodding as if to signal his return from his dream-state,

Dave shielded his eyes with his steely sunglasses and slipped out of Andre's grip. With Andy breathing a hopeless sigh, having slammed the boot unsuccessfully shut on the liquid gold and Andre already lost for words as he pulled the bungy cord up for him that hooked around the boot catch, for whatever reason the helpless American felt compelled to flick his cigarette butt into the compactor.

They cowered as if in slow motion waiting for an explosion. The butt disappeared into the compactor, but the explosion only sounded in their heads.

Behind the shades, Dave squinted and turned to face the car, walking forward quietly and slipped into the backseat, saying, 'Nice ride guys.'

With every crash and dull pop in the distance Andy and Andre tensed and waddled together, still partially squatting, to their doors.

The three and the Cortina, lucky to still have a windshield, sped out of the danger zone, past the engine-biter, past the rows of cars waiting to be drained, past X block, and onto the tar-sealed road to take to the street. As Andre looked back he didn't know where to direct his focus: at the blackened clouds of the Honda scrap yard or at the greasy American who had just paid him to risk their lives. For now he had to watch for police cars - questions would have to wait.

'On that topic, I've looked further into your case and found that as your father is your only parent with citizenship you will also need to apply for an Aotearoa Right of Abode...and the fee for that is...' Anita looked around for a number she could not see, readying herself to move as if she was still feeding.

Andy could no longer stomach remaining in the room. 'I have to go,' he said turning to the door, but then hesitated. 'Anita...' He closed his eyes and remembered something close to a Taoist mantra which he had come to accept - something beyond words that turned his hate into something closer to love, saying, 'Thank you for your help,' but on reflection became completely unable to recall a single word of that mantra.

'You're welcome.'

He noticed the accent then - or it could have been the vague tone of irony in her voice which suggested she knew full well how ridiculous his situation was, and that it was best that she say no more than she needed to. Although it could have been an accent not far from South Auckland, where irony breeds like one of many rabid defence mechanisms, he could not guarantee just because she grew up in the same surroundings that she fully understood just how crushing their conversation had been for him.

Andy left the room as coldly as he had entered, as if she single-handedly fed the system that forced him out, and just a little more obsessed by the woman

than before. For that reason he re-experienced his words and actions like acid reflux while he tried to digest them – of course she understood, but she has a job to do, mouths to feed, that kind of thing...it's bigger than you. He stepped past the Russian woman at the entrance who fussed over the infant in its enormous bassinet stroller. She eyed him up as if he was walking dirt and he certainly felt that it was true.

'Banjo probably did them a favour,' Andre said staring at the beer in front of him instead of actually drinking it.

Andy was halfway through his pint. Dave was onto a second, talking on his mobile.

'Banjo? Or us?' Andy asked visibly shattered, wondering if this beer as a consolation was worth the company. 'Why, anyway?'

Andre looked up at the flat-screen perched above the bar. Live footage of the fire had already made it to the public. He saw the black billowing clouds and suddenly felt thirsty. 'They would of burned all those bald tyres if they could of got away with it.'

'You might be right.'

'Sometimes you've got to burn away the old stuff to make way for the new.'

'Really?'

'I don't know - it's just a saying. Or something my uncle said anyway.'

Andy thought the saying might have been Buddhist or something like it, Taoist maybe. He nodded, looking around him randomly and was distracted by his own self-consciousness. He remembered being twenty and looking forward to his birthday so that he could legally drink in a bar, but before it came around the government changed the drinking age to eighteen. Any store owner who had refused him, now had to consider him as old enough to drink even though it had been a criminal act even a week, or even a day before.

It was an anti-climax to say the least, but then drinking always was an anti-climax for him, something he kept hidden from Andre. Instead of celebrating his twenty-first birthday with a legal drink, it came down to gambling as the last legal novelty available to him, but then being inexperienced with the casino rules he was still denied access because he wore untidy Jeans. Then the next time and the next time after that it was the wrong shoes or a shirt with a collar.

Now they sat in the central city casino bar, in steel-capped boots and overalls, it was clear that money was the quickest way around such rules. Of course Dave insisted they drink with him as a way to show his appreciation, and Andy, despite knowing that Andre was reluctant for religious reasons, seconded the decision never able to say no to a free drink. It was the first chance he had had,

after finding that all his old friends had supposedly grown out of it.

The barperson positioned herself in front of them and asked if Andy would like another. Her glare spoke loudly that she was adverse to serving two grubby workmen in their grubby overalls, but seeing as Dave had led her to believe they were national heroes, and paid off everyone that mattered, it was now her duty to pander to them. Andy nodded, and she paused at the sight of Andre's full glass, raising her eyebrows and walking off.

'I feel bad,' Andre admitted.

'Drinking helps.'

'What'll we do about the car?'

'We'll take it back, dump it outside - go back to work tomorrow, as if nothing happened.'

'I don't think we have jobs anymore.'

Another pint was left in front of Andy. Together they lifted their glasses and then lowered them, one taking a mouthful and the other a sip. Andre screwed up his face and Andy unzipped his overalls, overheated rather than cooled by the beer. A necklace fell out from the zip and the ornamental box bounced around into Andre's view.

'What is that ugly thing?'

'A treasured family heirloom - a taonga.'

Andre laughed, saying, 'Whatever,' and Andy couldn't keep a straight face.

'It is...kind of - my uncle gave it to me in Britain. The other crap necklace I bought just broke and fell off, so I just put this on the string.'

'Yeah, but what is it?'

'I don't know - a box with little wire mesh windows.'

'Stink gift. Stink taonga too.'

'He's into beekeeping.'

'What does he keep bees for?'

Andy squinted, struggling to not sound patronising, 'You get honey from bees.'

'Yeah, but why bother? Just buy it from the store. Is he poor?'

'No, not at all - he liked the science behind it I guess...'

'Stupid reason.'

'...oh, and he thought that without people like him the wild bee population would drop off and they'd be nothing pollinating the crops. He was head of some committee - went on TV and everything, explaining that we'd starve without bees.'

'Pretty good reason then. My uncle was on Wheel of Fortune.'

Dave breezed over and interrupted, grabbing their attention with his sincerity.

‘Guys, I really want to thank you for your help today.’

‘You don’t need to thank us anymore,’ Andre said waving his hand over his beer.

‘If I could take you with me I would, but some things money can’t buy.’

Andy waited patiently while Dave tipped half a pint of beer down his throat, but could not wait for the explanation. ‘Where you going Dave? It’s only fair that you should tell us.’

‘I’d love to tell ya, but...aw, who cares about the rules.’ He put his glass down and chuckled, leaning in towards them so the old long-haired guy down the bar couldn’t hear. ‘I bought property on a floating island and now it’s time to move in.’

The two took a drink and looked at each other, sharing their suspicion silently.

‘I know it sounds unlikely. A lot of things sound less unlikely the more money you have. This is just like an ocean liner, only it’s permanently out in the Pacific following the current, stopping off at ports from Asia to South America.’

‘Just floating around? A floating island?’ Andre was already blown away, deciding now was the time to start drinking.

‘Of course, they can direct it where to go if they wanted or if they have to, but it’s so big that it just...anyway that’s not important. It’s a paradise for rich people who don’t want to go anywhere in a hurry. Limited upper deck cabins. Fully furnished and serviced. There’s a shopping mall the size of five football fields underneath.’

‘That’s a big shopping mall. How come I haven’t heard of it,’ Andre pried. ‘I watch a lot of TV.’

Dave just looked at him presuming the answer would be obvious. There was another idea entering his mind that could benefit them. It was a long shot, but as he had become attached to these two, as he did to most people he met who were easily bought, he mulled it over while they joked about how ridiculous a floating island sounded.

Random pieces of information in Andy’s memory clicked together and he became animated, fuelled by the lunchtime beer. ‘Shopping mall? You mean that MJs mall that is visiting New Zealand?’

Andre knew exactly what he was talking about and told him straight, ‘You mean McJimmys. It visits every year. Bro, it’s bigger than Christmas now. Where have you been?’

‘Yeah, OK, but...’ Dave, caught in the middle of a plan, nodded and equated the two concepts, ‘Yes, it is technically McJimray’s Globomart...to you. But at the same time it is a cruise liner. I’m not making this up. I shouldn’t even be

telling you this, but if you have the right connections you can get on the upper deck.'

Andy suddenly noticed the time. 'Aw shit, I've got to be at a meeting.'

The statement made Andre laugh loudly. 'Jeez, don't forget your briefcase.'

'No, seriously. I've got to meet the immigration officer in ten minutes. Where are the car keys?'

Andre laughed louder, pointing at the screwdriver on the seat next to him.

With a slap on the back, Andy said, 'You're loosening up bro,' and left them to it.

EDWIN WILLIAMS

Edwin tried to focus on his response. Blinking as if to wipe the blurriness away, he stared blankly at the screen. A cruise liner cabin? Fred Garner, who he had known since teacher's college, was applying for some kind of cell on an ocean-bound prison?

Fred...not a chance. I didn't buy the Rayglass just to buy time on someone else's ship. Why would I, when I've got my own back on the water? He made principal too late in the game. He's settling. What's he settling for? What kind of decision is that? I would urge you to reconsider. Marge and I would love to welcome you on board.

He chuckled, but only in his mind, in fact as his eyes held their focus he found none of the thoughts that came motoring through had arrived on the screen. I'm going to have to get Sheryl in here. Sheryl! She won't be there. Always some kind of administration emergency.

The sixty-four year old looked out the window. The overcast sky, even late in the afternoon, still blinded him. Just wanted to see those trees reaching up and waving in the breeze. When I started at this school we didn't even have trees. Not like we invented them, but we could have invented them. We could do anything. Must put that in the memoirs. Learned from the best and the best taught me to work hard, aim high and pass it on. Pay it forward is what they said. I wonder if they still do.

Nothing is cherished now.

Take that little punk today. Interrupting my class with that cellphone noise and that hat. He didn't know what hit him.

Bernie and Ash had seen it. Well, at first they were at a loss. Bernie was looking out the window, she had thought it rude for the kid to be walking past other classes with music going. Ash had her eyes down only for a second, she knew better than to break eye contact with Mr Williams. When she looked up he

was gone. She would say that he was in the middle of sentence, some story related to this one-off history lesson he was taking, and then he was out the door before she even knew what was happening.

Bernie knew what was happening, but wondered how the principal had got outside in the seconds it took when even she couldn't even run that fast. She felt like this escalated quite fast, the joke that they used in the Stage Challenge production when the warring sides started their mock battles. It must have related to something that happened earlier that day.

Or maybe not, Ash would object. They were all frightened of Mr Williams, not so much for the detentions or other repercussions even though they were far too well-behaved to end up in detention, but more for his approach. It was hard and direct, and brought on at any suggestion of rebellion, and it penetrated to the heart of the action demanding that something deep inside change its ways, that something take responsibility for that outside thing, that human thing, and all its failings.

This day that directness came in the form of one hand grabbing the kid's jacket collar, a useful handle as the collar enclosed a flimsy rolled up hood, and another hand wrestling the cap off the kid's thick hair. It hadn't been that easy and one or two other students at the front of the class could see the hands had shot for their targets and ended up punching the kid in the neck and then head with the force of a headmaster's will, hard and direct.

Edwin did not flinch. His hands found their targets. The kid's protests meant nothing. Truth was the kid was still trying to hide the phone while talking incessantly, so anything from that mouth was just a distraction. This punk just wasn't about to get away with that. Edwin may have allowed the ministry to take every right away from every other teacher with these politically correct procedures. Not that he would put it this way with the others, but he was an old dog stuck in his ways and did not have the patience for that carry on.

So explaining to the punk that he was about to conduct a search was out of the question. He held the cap out to the side with his right hand, his stronger hand, and when he had his attention dove into the punk's pocket with the left. It was empty however, and that was when the right hand came in as backup.

Half a class of intelligent wide-eyed students now up on their seats, and any other day-dreaming kid from across the gardens would have seen him drive his hand straight into the student's crotch. Without his fingers free there was nothing short of a fist involved in the search, nudging hard and direct, and when it thought it felt something solid like a cellphone it drove in harder to see if it was correct. It wasn't correct, it merely mashed something soft behind the punk's shorts, lifting the body up momentarily while it probed and while the punk's

upper body seemed to flop over in submission.

Again he thought he had something. He drove his left in to meet the right, this time the strike hit with fingers like a saw blade, cutting into the soft folds of the fabric. These were certainly no regulation shorts, not even the right colour. In fact they were some kind of baggy, almost track-suit like pants. His eyes had finally caught up with him. He was not at all impressed with what he saw.

The student retaliated, a fist came out from the jacket sleeve hitting Edwin on the cheek. He straightened up, receiving a left and another right by the time he stood at full height. He was listening now, to the protestations coming from the husky voice - a far more feminine voice than expected, if the term could be used in this scenario. Edwin looked at the face for the first time. The cap, the posture, the attitude had all reeked of male, but this student was most definitely female. She took her cap and filled the air with expletives while walking briskly away. Threatening more violence with random vocal outbursts and gestures as she got her distance.

She disappeared leaving a peaceful garden, a serene courtyard, and the sullen statue of a recent headmaster, but also a quad full of students looking on quietly horrified until the whispers grew into a buzz. No matter how statuesque he was now, he would have to return to this reality with explanations. A white noise surrounded Edwin, hissing wildly, punctuated by chair legs scraping on floors. Classrooms had teachers too, and teacher-talk is worse than student gossip. Like a professional, he returned to the classroom to take control of his class, but left the story-telling for a more heads-down bookwork session. No matter what the reactions were from the students in this class, the reactions to come were going to be much harder to ignore.

Why don't they learn, Fred? We don't work miracles. We're no angels. Edwin found it hard to tell his thoughts from his actions. Where was he in the email reply? Nowhere, not even on the same page. Not even on the screen. I'll definitely need Sheryl, I can't even concentrate enough to work this machine. Oh, to be home, day done, dinner on its way; home in time for the news - wasn't that a warm memory. That is the most intriguing thing - I can almost see my lounge room now, in the reflection of the screen, in the screen, or even the screen itself.

Edwin found that he could not see the edge of his hallucination. He could look to the side but knew his head was not following in the right direction. He struggled to feel where his head was at all and worried that a heavy feeling meant that his head had drooped, and that perhaps he was sleeping at his desk again. Only this time, there was no sudden return to waking life, it was a sinking

feeling that he was no longer connected to that heavy lump and that he could walk around the hallucination if he wished.

‘Walk, dog,’ a husky voice said. ‘It’s the last time you’ll be able to do it, dog. So walk.’

That chatter, where did it come from? There is someone else here. Moving forward, over the screen and into his living room, Edwin hobbled as he tended to do when no one else was around. This punk was as close to no one as a person could get.

‘Are you lost?’ He said, piercing the low rumble that would otherwise be the only sound. He was talking to the student, and confused and agitated. ‘You go and get out of here this instant.’

‘You’re the one who’s lost.’ The student stood up and put on her cap, and then started wandering around the china cabinet.

‘Oh I know where I am and I know where you’re going.’ Edwin took a step but was frozen on the spot. He couldn’t connect his head with his body. It was as if his will had been removed and placed outside of him so that he could still see it and interact with it, but not control it. ‘This is my living room and you’re leaving.’

She ignored him, looking over the collections of objects. ‘Nah, this isn’t your living room. This here is up for sale. This is someone else’s, anyone else’s but yours. Not mine either.’

Edwin was plagued by the sinking feeling that never resolved itself. There were many things he could ignore, but there was one thing in the punk’s words that he agreed with: the fact that this wasn’t his living room. ‘I was at my desk in my office at work. How did I get here? How did you get here?’

‘It’s dark bro, time’s passing – you’re no longer at your desk. No longer at school.’ She looked at him with some tattered shred of respect. ‘You gotta let go Mr Williams. Things can get pretty dark around here pretty fast.’

‘It can’t be dark already. I was only just looking at the trees out my window. I was writing an email to Fred. I needed Sheryl. Sheryl!’ Calling again, he ended up trapped in the delusion that Sheryl was still behind a door somewhere waiting to come in and help. Clearly he was not in control of his senses at present. He needed her more than ever just to call home, ring his wife.

I’m losing my mind, I can’t lift my arms. There’s an intruder in the house and I can’t bloody well do anything about it!

The punk turned on that noise again, blaring out of the phone - what unearthly sounds, a cacophony of beeps and clicks, the scraping of metal on metal even, squeaking wheels and chatter, chatter, chatter, incessantly unrecognisable. Where am I going? What is happening?

If he could have he would bent over, got down on his knees and even crawled into a ball, but he stood there with the punk telling him again to walk.

‘I can’t! Turn off that music!’

‘Music, eh? Is that music to you?’

‘What do you want? Why are you here?’ His vulnerable bleating was to end as habit took over. ‘Did I confiscate something from you? You can see Sheryl about that.’

The punk looked him over and then into his eyes. ‘Things coming back to you. Looks like you’ll be coming back to them. Lucky I guess. I won’t be coming back. I just hung around to see your bruises. They’re pretty mean. Black eye. That’s my gift to you. But that blood clot - that’s all you bro.’

Edwin was hyperventilating. He tried to speak once more but all that came was a torrent of broken thoughts.

‘Should have kept walking Mr Williams, like I said, dog, keep that Mr Will going.’ She stared him down. ‘Someone need a little help. I’d ask you to lie down but you won’t listen to me. Maybe I’ll show you something that’ll help you out. What do you think happened to this pretty face right here?’ The student took her cap off and smoothed back her fringe into an oily mat. She then tapped her finger against her forehead. ‘What do you think happened to all these brains?’

What fragmented sounds and vision Edwin could piece together didn’t stay long. It would be a while before he was left alone with these fragments. For some reason after the realisation that he had suffered the stroke, and the discourse fuelled by family members on whether the blows to the head had caused this, Edwin could only bring to mind a plan of his living room, the renovation that had taken so long and came with such disruption.

It plagued him most when he pictured his wife’s china cabinet and tried to ascertain whether anything was moved or stolen that that gruesome face came to mind. If he tried to explain, with the incoherent mumbling he had yet to become aware of, he knew it would make no sense.

The punk could not have been in their living room out of town over these hills as she had her head crushed somewhere in South Auckland. He wouldn’t be able to prove to anyone that he had heard this from the student herself. He certainly couldn’t explain how he could describe every detail of her broken skull, caved-in face and distorted features, down to her long eyelashes and the mascara that had imprinted on the only patch of skin not encrusted with blackened blood.

Things get pretty dark around here, he would say to console himself when the rage or panic struck him.

If it was the last thing he was going to do, he would piece that memory back

together again, painstakingly piece by piece, never surrendering to the bleakest of thoughts as he had to face isolation, just him and broken Mr Will.

‘THE BREATH OF VACANCY’

Andy once again pulled the screwdriver out of his pocket and jammed it into the ignition barrel. He twisted and waited for the engine to turnover.

‘Floor it bro,’ Andre said as if they were now on a mission. When Andy had pulled up outside the casino, Andre was already waiting for him slightly angry and impatiently eager to explain Dave’s new idea.

‘I’m not going to floor it. Bro, I’ve been dodging cops from one side of Auckland to the other. I’m over it. You should be driving.’

‘No licence.’

‘You can’t drive a car!?’

‘I can drive a car. I said I don’t have a licence. It would be worse getting pulled over without a licence.’

‘Worse than getting pulled over with a screwdriver in the ignition, in a stolen car, after we may have helped a criminal destroy his drug car?’

‘Wha-at? Dave is nothing like that. He’s gonna get us on that boat, bro.’ Andre shared the piece of information with a smile he couldn’t hide. He described Dave now as if he was an angel, some kind of peace-bringing entity which had its angelic tricks reserved for these two. Then he shared the plan.

‘Are you drunk? Did Dave get you drunk Andre?’

‘No, I don’t know, maybe, but that’s what he said. He’s an agent. He already has two other bands signed up with contracts to tour with McJimmy’s all around the Pacific. He’s got the audition spot, we’ve just gotta bring the gear and do the song.’

Andre read Andy’s silence as disagreement. What could he disagree with when it came to a sure win like this? He waited for the response keeping his excitement contained. Andy’s face was unemotional, no expression, and needed a slap as far as Andre was concerned.

‘I...’

The big guy couldn’t help himself from talking over Andy. ‘I know what you’re going to say, bro. You weren’t there. He looked me in the eye and said, you guys can do this, easy - he believed in us. And then this old dude who looked like that two hundred year old rock star interrupted and said that he would trust Dave and for us to go for it.’

Andy couldn’t say anything against it. He placated Andre until they pulled up to the family home. Now in the shadows with the car still and cooling down, it seemed like this was a simple enough plan. Really, Andy just wanted to go inside and rest - too much driving. He picked his words as if he trusted that reality would be enough to stop Andre from doing this. ‘Do you really think we can do this?’

‘That’s what I asked you! I dunno, but I don’t want to not do it.’

‘Baker St?’ This was the suggested song, a song which came to Andre as he was waiting outside the casino, stewing on the idea with the false confidence of an alcohol high.

‘Yes.’ Andre was more worried about being caught by his aunty. She had never seen him drunk, but Andre knew she’d be able to tell straight away and then he’d be in for it. ‘Dave was pretty certain if we make it look like we’re musicians, and obviously play good enough, they wouldn’t have a reason to not hire us – they trust him and if he says we’re good, then we’re good. A tour bro, on a boat bro. But we’ve got to audition tonight, before they leave, so...’ He grabbed the roof and lifted himself out.

Andy finally had a moment to look the big guy over. He could see naive belief at work, like an undying will that could only be shut down by the experience of rejection and hurt. How had Andre been so lucky to have avoided that? Because he had never tried to be the musician he wanted to be, and may have never tried to be the man he wanted to be. Torn between getting Andre’s hopes up and bringing him down to earth, he smacked the steering wheel and demanded that Andre hurry up then.

‘Right, I’ll check for Crusher and chain him up. Wait here until I give you the signal - we need to find some threads and get the instruments.’

He slipped through the gate and silently walked around the house, where he was found straightaway by his aunty as she tried to put another bag of rubbish into the already full trash can. Andy who waited for the sign began to get impatient, shaking his head and mumbling, ‘Baker St,’ under his breath.

A car pulled up the driveway and parked behind him as he sat there frozen. The dark figure had to push past the overgrown branches that grew over the fence and leaned over to ask rudely what he was doing sitting in the driveway.

‘Waiting for Andre,’ was all Andy could say, making it sound more like a question than a statement and feeling small in a number of ways in comparison to this man.

‘Andre,’ the man said lacking any emotion and walked away, but not before clearing his throat loudly and spitting on the fence. He carried with him multiple bags and an 18-pack of cans, clamping it under one arm as he opened and closed the gate.

A voice called out from the street which caught the man’s attention - something about bringing those beers over the road, followed by an offensive refusal from the man. Some obscene gestures and comments didn’t help the uncomfortable stand-off which the man was guilty of aggravating.

Andy felt like he was caught in the middle of a likely South Auckland brawl scenario, but nothing started. ‘What happened to my street?’ he asked himself, watching the man walk towards his old family home, with the echoes of the disorderly crowd across the road still bouncing up the driveway.

He also watched the others stagger through the gate and behind the tall fence of the other house. He tried to recall the quiet old couple that lived there when he was growing up. There had been the smallest white picket fence around a manicured lawn, with roses and bulbs displayed for the neighbourhood. Even then he doubted that anyone cared when they walked past. A lot of the houses further down the street and closer to the main road were rented by unsavoury people. With every party the houses looked a little more rundown, the grass grew taller around bottles, cans and car parts, and fences rotted and fell apart.

Andy knew when he turned to alcohol it was so that the parties were the liberating experience they were meant to be, and in order to achieve that he had to relax and forget who he was and all the pressures of the real world. He found it hard to think of these other people and their destructive parties, or just the overall abuse of the substance, as related to the same need to relax and forget.

There was no sign of Crusher and there was no more time for sitting around. When he was certain the other man had gone inside, Andy quietly made his way to the garage, picked up the saxophone case, and as if he was half-believing in Dave’s plan too he looked around as if mentally saying goodbye to his last memory of home. It was then that he focused on the pallet of plasterboard and drums of paint and sealant. The work tables and tools had all disappeared.

He carried the case out of the garage only to find Crusher down the path immediately alerted and trotting towards him. Any thought he had nagging him has suddenly disappeared also.

Inside, Andre not only had to explain himself to his aunty, but now had to do so in the presence of Uncle Stan who drank a beer and noisily searched through

the contents of the freezer.

‘It’s an audition.’

‘For what?’

‘I told you already - a band.’

His uncle mumbled, ‘What’s your band called?’

Andre looked away and said quietly, ‘We don’t have a name.’

‘Why don’t called it The Andres?’

‘What?’

‘Seeing as you like the name so much.’

Andre was silent, knowing what was coming next.

‘What’s wrong with the name you were given? Eh?’ He yelled this now, head in the freezer, and pulled a chunk of meat up with one hand. ‘Why don’t you cook some of this?’ He asked Rosana.

‘It’s for a special occasion.’

‘I’m here now - isn’t that special enough? I paid for it, I want to eat it. Put it on now.’

She looked at him with her eyes bulging out of their sockets.

A small voice in Andre’s head said, ‘Stop telling everybody what to do,’ and he barely recognised it as his own will to be heard.

The two men stared at each other, Andre somehow unknowingly projecting that will, the room now as cold as the chunk of meat resting on the top of the freezer. The uncle took a breath which pumped up his chest as wide as his gut and if it wasn’t for two of the kids pushing into the kitchen yelling for everyone to come see what was on TV Andre knew he was going to get an earful just for staring at him.

Rosana moved forward taking the meat off the bloated man and pushed the kids out, catching a glimpse of the news report. ‘Aii, it’s your work! There’s been a fire! Quick.’

The kids ran to their grandmother who stopped her knitting to watch the TV also. Stan watched from the kitchen and drained another can. From the corridor Viliami appeared playfully slapping his brother on the back of the head with a mini-jump but Andre stepped out slowly into the lounge without playing along. He took the neck of the guitar in his hand for support and leant on it heavily when the reporter on the scene began talking about two workers who were still unaccounted for - the whole family listening for the details.

‘...and right now a search is underway for Andy Bodine and Heremaia Waipu, Jr...’

‘*She* knows your name!’ Andre’s uncle yelled from the kitchen opening another can with a wince as he unfurled his hand. He looked at his hand as if he

could see right through to the joints. The pain he felt could not distract him from realising what that search might mean and hobbled over to the kitchen door.

Rosana stared at the TV and asked while still listening and turning her head from TV to Andre, and back and forth, 'Why are they saying your name? Why are you unaccounted?'

'...authorities cannot be certain the two workers evacuated in time and it is too early to tell if they were caught in the explosion...'

The room of concerned faces, Andre's grandmother included, looked at the billowing smoke, all transfixed by the size of the fire. The grandmother shuffled in her seat, saying, 'Hope they're alright.' Rosana ignored her looking for Andre's reaction, but he was no longer in the room.

Andre found Andy loading the car, still in his overalls which were now even more ripped. He ignored him when he heard the whine, 'What happened to the signal?' Andre instead closed the gate and threw the guitar into the backseat, ignoring Andy's impatient expression, and slid behind the wheel. The sound of the engine trying to turnover sent Andy flying for the passenger seat.

Andy thought about repeating himself, stressing the fact that he had been mauled by that demented dog again, but only had a second to warn him about reversing. He jumped in yelling, 'There's a...'

'No!' Andre paused. The sound of the party could be heard as the engine went quiet again. 'You know what Rosana told me? She told me before I even got inside that she sold my saxophone today. Someone's picking it up in the weekend. All the other stuff in the garage, gone. She's gonna rent the garage.'

'Rent the garage?'

'You heard me. She said, if those Asians down the road can do it, so can we. She took a loan from the same scheme that you parents were paying into - charity, I mean - that Ab Origene thing, did you know? A loan to pay for this house when your parents couldn't stay here any longer. Now she's saying to make the payments we have to pay more rent, and some family's going to move in to the garage, and my stuff isn't my stuff anymore.'

'I've got your saxophone.'

Andre shook himself after a long thought. 'Well, good. We're going to rock it tonight bro...'

'Bro...'

He turned the screwdriver and the engine growled once again.

'No bro, we're doing this - no matter what.'

'Bro, there's a...'

He slammed his foot on the accelerator letting the clutch out slowly and made contact with the bumper of his uncle's car before Andy could finish.

‘There’s a car behind you!’

Both cars moved as Andre tried to understand what was being said.

‘Whose car?’ Andre asked without thinking, and they looked back at the house together seeing the uncle leap down the stairs in a rage. Swearing under his, he pushed harder on the accelerator. ‘Why won’t it go harder!?’

‘Handbrake man!’ Andy yelled and pushed the handbrake down.

The wreck was propelled backwards pushing the other vehicle with it down the driveway. Andre only gained control by slamming on the brake as they rolled out onto the street. The sight of Uncle Stan’s car rolling across the street and into a fence was reserved for Andy alone.

Andre couldn’t take his eyes off his uncle as the man ran into view and an unexpected object rolled out from the shadows onto the driveway in front of him. Stan hit the object at full speed and landed on the concrete, beer can spewing out in front of him. It was a fall that no one could spring back up from quickly.

It was Crusher who rolled out unexpectedly, tied up in a fishing net complete with plastic floats, the only thing Andy could find to securely leave without another bite to his buttocks. He would have to explain later.

Andre reversed, steering the Cortina as if he was attacking the wheel like a mad bear. The car crunched over the gutter and over various objects littering the area, then jammed a tyre against the kerb. Now he could see where his uncle’s car had ended up, the damage to the neighbour’s fence was added to his growing list of reasons why he could never come back. Andy caught his friend in a trance with his mouth wide open as if anguish was coursing from his body. He urged him to go and Andre struggled to get the car into gear and away from the kerb.

‘He’s gonna kill me,’ Andre wailed slowly.

‘They’re gonna kill *us* - just go Andre!’ Andy could see the hands trying to untangle pieces of corrugated iron from their path. Even over the car engine their voices could be heard berating each other like wild dogs in a cage.

‘That’s the HQ.’

‘I could guess that.’

‘I just pushed my uncle’s car into a gang compound!? I’m flip, flip...flippin’ f-ed, bro!’ Andre revved hard and the car bounced and made contact with the road again, scattering whatever was in the gutter in its wake.

It was no short drive to the centre of town. Gradually Andre had come out of his trance and added driving from the scene of the crime to his list of offences.

Andy unfocused his eyes and took in the greater city. When Andre finally stopped bringing up his impending death by angry males he might have had a chance also to feel the freedom instead of the fear. The house and suburb they

escaped from, and might never return to, was south - so south it was almost in the next district. Andy could feel the weight off his shoulders now with the distance growing. It wasn't the first time he had felt that about the suburb and that it gave him such a feeling of closure was the main reason he had not tried to reconnect with his friends. There was an invisible line he had crossed which until now he had been on the wrong side of, and now he felt he was resuming his correct path.

Travelling north now, the actual border of the city, another invisible line, was a mystery to them - who knew just how far it reached. Andy knew most people wouldn't consider its slow advance just as they wouldn't consider its existence at all. He wondered what Andre thought, but knew not to ask - it would be too abstract, too irrelevant given his circumstances. So it was for Andy alone to know he suddenly felt at home now that he was entering the unknown and bringing no expectations, with no fixed abode and no security. Unattached, he thought, or non-attachment like he had read about - again, too abstract to bother Andre with.

'You know what you're gonna say on stage?'

Andre reacted sharply. '*I'm* not gonna say anything. You're the frontman.'

'You're on the saxophone and I'm on the guitar - what makes *me* the frontman?'

'Dave can do the talking then.'

'Dave's playing?'

'Of course - that why he suggested it. He plays the drums. He was real keen. They already had a set set-up and he had a crack at it.'

'Dave can play drums - that makes things easier. Let him speak...and sing too, we should let him sing.'

'Why don't you want to sing?'

Andy wasn't ready for the question. Lack of practice came to mind, but then again he never really practiced. That he didn't want to upstage anybody wasn't the best reasoning and it sounded pretentious. And it wasn't that he lacked confidence - if he did, Andre would just try and build his confidence up.

He checked Andre's face. At least he was focusing on something more positive, and the least Andy could do was share that self-assurance, that buoyancy that got him through all the other daunting moments. Andre needed that more than he needed someone trying to be safe.

'Nah, I'll sing,' Andy said nodding, feeling a nervous surge and followed the rows of houses neighbouring the motorway as they zoomed past. 'And I'll say something. I'll frontman it. I'll say in a bluesy deep voice: This city desert makes you feel so cold. It's got so many people but it's got no soul...'

Andre thought for a moment. 'That's deep, bro, but I don't think people wanna hear that about the city.'

'It's the lyrics of the song we're going to play, Andre.'

'Aw. Yeah, but no one listens to the lyrics. Just say something nice and thankful like thank you for coming, enjoy your gambling and the all-you-can-eat buffet.'

Andy nodded, looking away but trying to shelter from the air rushing in through the window. A plane flew over the motorway and although he felt that same urge to abandon everything and take a flight to some unknown land, it instead made him think of Anita and his meeting with her earlier. 'I don't have many nice things to say.'

'You are pretty quiet.'

'Man, that shows we were raised right, weren't we? You want me to say nice, thankful things, and I can't say anything because my mother told me if you don't have anything nice to say...'

'Don't say anything - I know, but if you were talking to some agent who can make the choice to either put us on a paradise island or on the dole...?'

Andy straightened up, still with a thought of Anita rattling around inside his head - something about her mechanical manner stung him at the time, or it could have been that she was breast-feeding at the time. 'Mmmm, that's a pretty good reason to fake it. Paradise island you reckon?'

Just as they were taking the last city off-ramp, Dave was stepping out of a water taxi and looking around the wharves. He spoke on his phone as he always did -inconsiderately loudly - to yet another person he wasn't supposed to share the secret with, talking at length about the floating island. He lit a cigarette and sat on a bench, making himself comfortable.

'The QEII? The QEII, Roger?' He exclaimed, trying to destroy a British accent. 'Try four QEIIs shoulder to shoulder. I'm not kiddin'. A hull like the Superdome. No, I can't right now - I'm meeting with these two guys I'm tryin'a get onboard. Good guys. Playing drums for them so they can audition as an act. For the island. Drums. I know - I haven't played in years. Too rich to drum anymore.'

He laughed and directed the conversation back to the floating island, looking around him at no one in particular. 'I shouldn't be telling you this. I said, I shouldn't be telling you this, but they haven't got a chance. The acts were in place months ago. They've already been touring. I'm only doing it because... because they remind me of our younger days, oh, and they did me a huge favour. The car, the XLR2, *her* XLR2. Yeah, you get me, hers as in his - they helped me put it out of commission. Yeah, yeah, crushed like a tin can. Anyway, the past is

just that, the past. You put it in a box and walk away from it; you crush it into a tiny box and then spoil yourself with something new and wonderful.'

Dave looked out to sea at a boat slowly moving towards the wharf. 'Where am I? Why do you ask? You're too late Roger. Ships sailed. Well, it's about to, literally. I'm loading my bags on the transfer as we speak. You're right, I'm lying, I wouldn't load my own bags. No shortage of lackies in this city though. If they speak English, yeah you hit the nail on the head there my friend. Anyway my transfer is here so I must away. Yeah you too. Toodle pip.'

The small vessel moved in close. After the rope was fastened a hand was stretched out to Dave and he waved it off looking around the ship for the familiar face he expected. 'Where's Duncan? The events manager?'

'Not aboard. We've been sent to pick you up. Are you coming aboard?'

'Yeah, but I thought...Duncan was coming and we'd have time for a drink or two. I'm not prepared to leave just yet.'

Another man had already loaded Dave's bags onto the vessel.

'I believe the man you're speaking of was too sick for the voyage.'

'Duncan? Too sick? Ah...you're not going to take a break now are you? For like...an hour or so?'

'We really do need to get going, I'm afraid.'

'Oh,' said Dave, looking at his watch and then back at the city. No time for sentimentality, he brightened up and sighed. 'Right you are guv'ner.'

Andy and Andre, both with instruments in hand and having been refused access at the elevator entrance, found the main entrance with the security guard Dave had originally paid off. They explained their return to the casino, Andre quick with the lies saying the overalls were band costumes. The guard let them through quickly, wanting nothing to do with them, and in the upstairs bar where the surly bartender looked them over again they began to make movements like they were setting up, slowly and increasingly unsure of their abilities.

'Are we too late? Too early? The drums and mics are set up ready to go.'

Andre ignored the strange looks from the soundman, and various patrons, assured by the time-honoured maxim of not judging a book by its cover. 'Wish we could've at least got changed. We look stupid.'

'It's a band uniform,' Andy assured him smiling to himself, liking his companion's panicked energy, trying to tune the guitar with one ear and no concentration.

'It's a clown suit.'

'Yep,' Andy nodded.

It was ten excruciating minutes before Andre felt brave enough to ask the bartender if she'd seen Dave since this afternoon. She didn't even speak,

choosing to shake her head slowly, reluctant to acknowledge him at all. With this blow to his self esteem he felt it only a shade more awkward to individually ask the patrons of the bar if any of them were agents for a floating island.

When he returned to Andy he pulled him in close to explain, 'I think it's the guy in the corner. He said he wasn't an agent, but seemed interested to hear what we have to play.'

Andy looked at him, making out only an outline. It seemed entirely possible that this was the other agent, or whatever Dave had called him. 'Hope he's got a short attention span, because without Dave this is...'

Despite suffering nervous confusion with sudden spikes of confidence, Andre concluded, 'This is going to be great. Dave will be here and he'll take over from you on the drums whenever he gets here.'

'What?'

The big guy had pulled out the glistening saxophone and assembled the pieces without even looking at it. He worked through the keys and moistened the reed like he had played every day since high school. 'Get behind the drums. The mic will pick up the guitar.'

'The mic won't...'

Staring in the agent's direction, the possessed Andre grabbed Andy's shoulder strap and pulled him in. 'Come on bro, it's time to go. It's now or never.'

Quietly and awkwardly, but with some defiant self-assurance, the overall-wearing musicians found their positions and although there was certain enthusiasm from audience members who were waiting for anything to happen, and eventual compliance from a confused soundman, their moment came together.

They had in their minds a sound, and had chosen a song which was unmistakable and catchy enough to hold the attention of the evening drinkers. The sound in reality which consisted of a neglected saxophone, the out of time thumps and cricks care of Andy's legs, and the confident yet out of tune chords from the throw-around guitar, was nothing short of intolerable.

Andre at first tried to cover the lack of other instruments by humming, and then doubled Andy's singing - both mixing the lines and making up substantial portions - and when the chorus hit it was a signal to most in the bar to get back to their pokie machines. Andre had not remembered to change the reed and even if he had perfectly belted out the notes in tune with the guitar it could not have covered the abrupt squeaks that came just as he hit the highest notes.

To bring the performance to a climax the musicians who owned the microphones and drum set which the overalls-wearing clowns were abusing,

came to the stage and crowded around the two of them until they got the hint. When the passive intimidation took effect, they were forced to abort the song entirely before the second chorus, but still clung to their mic stands long enough to thank the audience and the agent for the opportunity of a lifetime.

A couple of security guards had also turned up and before they were escorted out of the casino the bartender was able to lean over the bar to pass on a message, saying, 'Your friend Dave called, and said he waited at the wharf as long as he could. He also said the ship has sailed, if that means anything to you.' She nodded and then shook her head, not caring about either response.

Andre could barely find his voice, trying to ask her questions as the security guards overshadowed him, but making no complete sentence.

'Oh, he did leave an online contact,' she said, waving a piece of paper which Andy was only just able to take from her hand.

The security guards led them to the exit with another person following closely behind. Andre recounted the conversation at Andy's request.

'Dave said something about being at the wharf at eight. I thought he said he'd arrive at the wharf at...yeah he did - he said *I'll* be at the wharf at eight! Or *he* needed to be at the wharf at eight.'

Andy echoed the big man, trying to calm him with a rational analysis of the happenings of the night. '*I'll* be at the wharf...'

'He didn't say *we* should be at the wharf at eight.'

'He didn't?'

'No! He said I'll *meet* you there, and pointed at the bar.'

'He didn't say I'll meet you *there*...and point to the wharf?'

'How could he point to the wharf if we couldn't see it? He pointed behind him.'

'Maybe he pointed at the metaphorical wharf in his head that was metaphorically behind him! Y'know like, meet me at the wharf and give me a ride from there.'

'He said...aw, it doesn't matter what he said!' Andre dismissed the whole thing.

'We still have a contact - maybe we can still get on the island if...'

'Awww, there is no floating island. He's just some dick who wanted to make us look bad.'

'What about the agent?'

'What about...*that* old man?'

The man who followed them, struggling to keep up with the pace of the guards, tried to interrupt the conversation. 'I'm not just old, I'm super-old.'

Andy was momentarily distracted. He thought he recognised the old man but

couldn't stop or turn around fully to take a good look. 'Is he following us?'

'That probably wasn't an agent. It was all a load of...'

'Is the agent following us, Andre?'

He did his best to arch his back and look behind him, fighting off the hands of the security guards. 'What is he, is that, that's the agent.'

The old man said something which became lost in the casino noise. Just as they reached the lifts he tried to speak again. It sounded only like he was mumbling, or like he was asking for a ride downtown. The two of them were lucky to avoid a trespass order, as was the threat as they were escorted off the property, but even luckier that the guards did not know they were technically wanted men. The thought did come to Andy that they would soon have to get on the move, but it was a thought that was only a small part of a jumble of such thoughts.

It was at the wharves, after they let the old man ride along downtown and having spent five minutes in absolute silence finding no trace of Dave, that John Benjamin introduced himself as Chris Ridge, the John Benjamin impersonator.

Andy looked out over the water for some desperate reason hoping to see this floating island while Andre took his frustrations out on the car. Steel-capped boots dented the panels, but made no real change to the state of the wreck. Finally letting go of the foolish assumption that the old man was an agent, he gripped the vehicle and shook it. Andy could bear the frustration, but not bear to see another bear it, he felt sorry for the big man and slapped him on the back.

Andre closed his eyes and looked like he was about to cry. He seethed, 'I can't believe this!'

While Andre tried to swallow his rage, Andy felt the need to ask Chris if he had heard of this island. It became clear that Chris had been drinking most of the day as a wave of beer breath crashed over Andy.

'It's just a floating supermarket isn't it? McJimray's? They announced the port, the town that won the right to host the sale.'

'Did they?' Andy asked without caring.

'Oamaru, North Otago. Imagine my surprise when I find out that's where I'm from.'

'What's that?' Andy asked.

'I mean, imagine my surprise when I find out that the biggest sale in the biggest shopping centre on the planet is going to happen in Ridgie's old home town.'

'Imagine that.' Andy echoed. He took another look at Andre who was showing some tears, and averted his eyes.

'Why is your friend so upset?'

‘I’m not upset!’ Andre yelled through his sleeve. ‘What do you know, you impersonator! You get rich off of someone else’s hard work. You don’t deserve what you’ve got.’

Chris smiled. His watery eyes showed no anger, but he nodded like he had heard this before. ‘As it happens, I don’t have anything.’

‘Then go back where you came from. Omaramu or wherever. I suppose you still go around pretending your John Benjamin, y’old bastard!’

The man could only continue nodding. Andy stood in between confused at how to explain. ‘We took a risk today. That was all. It didn’t turn out well.’

‘Risk?’ Chris slurred, a building admission was burning to come out.

Andre yelled at himself, ‘I can’t go back home. I don’t have a job. I got no money cos Rosana takes it all.’

‘We tried to audition to play on that McJimray’s, at the cost of a few things.’

Chris coughed as he said, ‘Probably a good thing that didn’t happen, then? Just my professional opinion.’

‘I got no clothes... All I’ve got is this stupid saxophone with it’s old ass reed.’

Andy tried to console him, gripping the straps of his backpack and saying, ‘We still have some money, though, bro.’

‘Listen,’ Chris interrupted. ‘Don’t be sorry for the risks you take. Risk-taking is what made this country.’

‘You’d know, old man. You probably made this country.’

Andy repeated himself. ‘I still have money. We’re all good.’

Chris, or the John Benjamin inside of him, wanted to tell them he had done a lot for this country, even when it reformed around him, even when he realised he barely related to the image of the nation that split its people down the middle. He did a lot to make people forget the changes and adapt. He could not use his name and history anymore. Chris had to be Chris. ‘I’m 189 years old!’

Andy and Andre both looked at Chris as if he was lying. They knew it was possible with the very rich, and they could only presume he had made a fortune impersonating the rock star.

Their silence showed there was still some authority in this shadow of his former self. Chris continued, ‘I’ve done my fair share. I’ve been knocked around and knocked down. You don’t stand around crying when you get knocked down.’

Andre still had some rage, despite being confused by the strength of this walking antique. He shook his head and closed his eyes, asking as if he was praying, ‘What do we do?’

‘When there’s any doubt, drink.’

‘Beer,’ Andre said, forming the word so imperfectly it mutated. ‘Beeeer. Yes? Yes, yessss!’

That Andre opened his eyes without a single tear was a good sign, but that Andy’s God-fearing friend was so quickly turning to alcohol was not, and being a man of little self-control who had always sworn that he was a happy drunk in every respect, Andy could only agree.

Chris drew them in, pulling at their arms to lead them to the wreck. ‘Man, being reasonable, must get drunk; the best of life is but intoxication,’ he ranted. ‘But then a drunk would say that.’

‘Who said that?’ Andre asked with a twisted smile on his face, swallowing his anger along with his shame for crying in front of this wise old man.

‘Lord Byron...I think.’

Andre looked at Andy. ‘What kind of name is that?’

Andy could only shake his head. He found himself at the driving wheel about to take Andre and an impersonator on a drinking binge - one binge he was not all that committed to himself - keeping his mind on not being caught with the car and somehow leading his friend to a safer, better place.

Unfortunately a bottle store was as easy to arrive at as the cash was easy to depart with. Easy come and easy go might have shot to mind had Andy spent that long thinking about it. The store person had commented, ‘Working late?’ It was easiest to nod and carry the boxes away without entering into a conversation, as was the city way. Andre had lost all relativity, carrying not one but three 24 packs to and past the counter.

Andre wasn’t alone with drinking like a fish, Chris for his age miraculously seemed to keep up, but the big man had never experienced the ill effects of intoxication or a hangover. Andy had never seen or been so amazed by such drinking with abandon, the type of naivety he and Chris would have shared once. There was no care about where the beer might slop, or the bottles that would collect in the foot well or find their way out of the doors on toilet stops.

Andy sipped on a bottle but felt more intoxicated just because Andre’s clownish performance was so contagious. After the childish drinking games calmed down the motion of the car lulled Chris to sleep. Between nodding off and waking disoriented and angry, Andre’s last jolts of life ended with bottles thrown from the moving vehicle and the half-hearted attempt at asking where they were going. Andy shook his head and mumbled to himself, ‘You deserve this big guy, let yourself go. At least once, feel that high and that low.’

He decided to let them both sleep and knowing Andre would need somewhere peaceful to work through his recovery he drove them north. Hours later he found the bach he was looking for and turned into the section, rolling

over the grass slowly and then turning off the engine to let the car roll silently down the slope closer to the dwelling. He took the remainder of one box of beer followed a rough path out the back gate and onto the sand dune. There he sat and demolished the box by himself. Underneath an oppressive screen of stars and with an ocean breeze gracing him as fresh and eternal as any divine gift, he wondered why he hadn't made this pilgrimage before. It was on this coast that he felt more at home, more than anywhere else, and in a drunken moment of enlightenment he pledged to walk the perimeter of the island in the hope of making a meaningful full circle.

The rolling waves crashing so close to the dune would hide a number of minor crimes, the worst of all using the screwdriver that had been jammed in the vehicle's ignition to knock a sliver of glass from the back window, then using it to flip the window latch open so he could reach his arm in to unlock the door. There was no hiding the evidence of this crime in the long run, but as the bach was owned by an uncle, however distant a relation that uncle was, and as Andre had also damaged the property of a family member that night, it was only fair to share some of the remorse in the morning. Just in case it mattered he threw the screwdriver into the sand dunes aiming to blame the break-in on someone else.

In terms of remorse Andre was well ahead of him as he climbed out of the backseat more disoriented than he had ever felt. Sunlight and seabirds signalled the morning after at some unknown coastal location. He could not remember much and was reluctant to try. The sight of the old man who he had shared a backseat with and who had used him as a pillow all night was too much to handle, and with a fuzzy, heavy head that seemed to pin all the negative thoughts in the entire world on him, he staggered away from the vehicle towards the sea only to find the breeze overwhelming.

Andy returned to the bach after a morning swim and found Andre rubbing his prickly scalp in confusion. Comparatively he had found his centre, something he had heard the spiritualist-types say, using the ocean to baptise and cleanse himself of his past. When he explained that he'd broken into the bach, Andre wanted nothing more than to get back on the road. He was adamant they would go to jail, and that it was inevitable that they would be found. Knowing Andre would be as rage-prone as any hungry bear would be, he quickly pulled his overalls back on and caught up with him.

'Where's the screwdriver?' Andre asked coming back from the vehicle.

'It's not in the ignition?' Andy asked, failing to remember a few details from last night.

'What did you do with it?'

They both searched around the vehicle, and then around the back, until Andre worked himself into a quiet rage.

‘Come on,’ he hoarsely whispered. ‘We need to get out of here. This is wrong.’

Andy refused to argue the point, knowing the greatest portion of his anxiety came from the hangover. It was useless to talk Andre into believing that the world was not about to end when his inner world was clearly crashing in on him.

‘Look, we’ve got an opportunity here. Let’s shed the overalls, get into some clothes that will help us blend in.’ Andy’s calmest tone was coming out now that he had the man’s attention. ‘We’ll get cleaned up, blend in, and no one will have a reason to suspect us of anything. Up here no one knows anything. No one cares about anything.’

‘Up here?’ Andre looked outside as if he might see a prominent landmark. ‘Where are we?’

‘Up North, Waipu Cove.’

‘Waipu?’ Andre sniggered with little warmth. It was as if Andy was playing a trick on him picking a small town that shared the same name as him, or pretending to have taken him there when they were only just out of the city, or any number of other possibilities from supplying him with poison to poisoning him by his own hand. There was nothing hidden behind Andy’s expression at all and it sunk in that they would be stranded hours out of the city if they didn’t find that screwdriver soon. ‘We need that screwdriver...now!’

‘Come on man...’

‘No, *you* come on man! I crashed my dad’s car into a gang headquarters. I dumped a random guy’s car in the compacter. I made Banjo burn the yard down!’

‘No you...’

‘I played dumb sax at the casino in front of a hot bar chick and woke up in Waipu and can’t even think properly! And I’m hungry! Everything sux! Where’s the flippin’ screwdriver!’

Andy waited for Andre to sit on his rage for a moment and then explained, ‘I still had it in my hand when I was helping you out of the car.’

‘But I was still in the car when I woke up.’

‘That’s right.’ Andy thought for a moment and decided a convenient lie would help calm him down. He knew what he had done the night before, but what good was the truth now? ‘You grabbed it off me and threw it into the dunes in the dark and then collapsed back into the seat.’

‘Aw...what!?’

Andre marched over to the back of the section and scanned the dunes. Andy

left him to it, slipped out of the overalls and looked through the wardrobe. When he found Andre the man was looking around in circles unsure of where to start and barely noticed that Andy was now wearing a strange, patterned silk shirt and wide brim hat. The shirt was so large it could have been a poncho and was almost the same texture as his boxer shorts.

‘What are you wearing that for?’

‘This was the only thing I could find in the bach.’ Another lie, but this time in the hope that Andre would relax and have a laugh.

Andy found his footing in the loose sand. If he had stepped on the screwdriver by chance he would have pushed it down further.

‘Why aren’t you helping? Why are you going through someone else’s stuff? Get serious!’

‘The bach is in the family. These are my uncle’s clothes or probably his fathers or even grandfather’s clothes. No one will notice or care. And plus I’m not so sure I’m going back to the city and I don’t know if you should go either. I’m gonna try it out here. Maybe a small town would be better, or maybe just walk the coast until I find something I like.’

‘Whaat?’ Andre couldn’t think of anything more stupid than go out walking when he had a home to go to where his dinner was made for him every night, his washing was done for him, and there was always fried bread in the pantry. ‘Nah, we’ll find the screwdriver and head back, eh?’ Even if it meant getting a beating from his uncle, it was still home - although it would be some legendary beating, if not a beating consisting of a number of patched members taking turns.

‘You can.’

There was a long, awkward pause. Andre could only say, ‘Alright then,’ and randomly kick around in the sand.

‘OK?’

‘OK then,’ he repeated, sounding more annoyed.

Andy looked out at the ocean and then up the beach wondering which way to head. He couldn’t decide and froze on the spot. If Andre wanted that screwdriver so bad it was only right that he should at least try to help him find it. He scattered the sand around his feet and then threw the other shirt he was holding onto the sedge so he could dig around. ‘You know I was thinking we should have given the band a name.’

‘What band?’

‘I was thinking it could have given us something to talk about on stage, rather than just go into the song. Every group needs a name.’

‘Too late now.’

‘I thought maybe we should have called it The Unoriginals. Without origin.’

‘Or just a band playing unoriginal songs.’

‘I’m proud to be unoriginal. Just a name really. As good as any.’

Andre stayed silent having exhausted every cynical thing he wanted to say. He didn’t make eye contact when Andy gave up searching and said goodbye. It was his turn to stand frozen in indecision as his backpacker friend headed north. He finally went back to digging around and made a few more dints in the enormous hill to be covered.

Staggering up the hill was hard enough, but every time he bent down the overalls pulled tight between his legs. It took all his effort to reach the top and took a last look around him through the sedge. He found the shirt that was left for him and picked it up. Something about it reminded him of the old man they’d left in the back seat.

He could never express just how bad he felt. The words would come out like a religious testimony, the type of personal talk each member of the congregation would get up and make everyone else listen to every month. Andre never learnt that language from any one in particular and never spoke it. It was just under the surface where it should stay and be reserved for those special prayers when you’ve done something really wrong, not for when you just had a bad week and you’re a little worried about stuff.

He felt like praying for help in finding the screwdriver, thinking just like a kid that if he concentrated really hard on praying something would happen. It never did when he was a kid - nothing he prayed for ever happened and it didn’t happen now. Really the only thing he could trust was that when he was pushed, and when he had freed himself from wallowing and thinking he could pray his way out, he would make a decision for himself and that decision would be right because it made things happen.

Andre spoke to himself, ‘You can’t do anything in this world without making it happen yourself. No praying, just action.’

He stood on the dune with the shirt in his hands, looking down the beach and to the car and back again. No decision came.

OTHER USEFUL HUMAN BEINGS

In the alley at the end of his Auntie and Uncle's deadend street, Luke Imurangi, or Mu, and his girlfriend Lolita James, were locked in a drunken public display of affection.

Young kids banged on the fence and talked about this 'pash' that was still going, that looked as if they were going to knock each other's teeth out. Hands were where they shouldn't be and the couple, a couple of only six months, showed they didn't care who saw. Something about that stolen wine made them not care about anything.

That was until Rae, Luke's cousin found them.

'Get a room!' Rae yelled from the path, not wanting to enter the alleyway with these two pressed against each other.

Luke broke away and sauntered up to Rae, throwing an open hand towards hers, saying, 'Rae Z, cuz, what you up to?'

'Not much Mu.'

They greeted each other and Luke threw his arm around the cousin putting his weight on her.

'You still dressing like a boy.'

Rae pushed away, elbowing Luke in the ribs but could not distance herself.

'What boy wanted to get with you dressed like that?'

Lolita pushed away from the fence and straightened her clothing. 'A drunk one.'

'Yeah, a drunk one, eh? A bad boy.' Luke almost had her around the neck. 'They let you away with that at school?'

Muffled by his jacket. 'What do you think?'

'Nah, eh? Got a bad girl right here now Lita.'

Lolita gave her a hug and tried to pull her away from drunken Luke. 'A bad

girl alright. Wanna have a drink?' Looking around. 'Where'd you put that bottle?'

Angrily, 'Don't remember, don't care. She can't drink. What are you now? Fifteen?'

'Almost.'

'Almost? Why're you laughing Lita? Don't give her that. She's not even fifteen.'

'You know what they say, old enough to bleed...'

'I'm old enough to drink.' Pushing away from Luke, grabbing bottle and... It's not the cheap stuff, or low alcohol - this stuff is sour, tastes like spirits, makes you want to throw up after you scull it back. Have these two been sculling or just sipping? 'What is this shit?'

'That's the good shit. Wo-ah, girl, you don't have to prove it to me.'

Lolita reached for the bottle. Stand off. She says, 'What did they say, when they saw you in that? They say you hiding something?'

'I'm not hiding nothing.'

Bottle taken by Luke and lifted in the air, put to his lips. 'Mmm-hmmm.' One eye on bottle, one hand reaching for Rae's waist.

'Hands off Mu. Last one who reached for me got a black eye.'

'Who?' Bottle down, angry face. 'Who'd you punch?' Staggering.

'Principal Williams.'

They laugh. Bottle passed around. Lita sips and passes to Rae, but she pulls it away and jokes. 'You've had too much. Making up stories.'

Luke pulls out half bottle brown spirit. Shots back and breathes out bourbon with o-shaped mouth. Hands it to Rae. 'She's not had enough. You gave Principal Williams a real black eye?'

'I don't know if it turned black.'

'Oh, you'd know if it - you get the angle right, every good knock makes a bruise. Why'd you knock the Principal?'

Lita waves whisky away as Rae offers it to her, raises wine bottle. 'Why not? If I could go back I would knock him too.'

Rae tips whisky and shots more foul-tasting spirit.

'He grabbed my hat. Tried to take my phone.'

'Did he get his hands in there?' Luke leering. 'Did he get you alone?'

'Under the covered way, in front of everyone. Knocked him in the side of the head.'

'Uh, no black eye then.' Luke staggering and pretending to not. Looking for something.

Rae slips bottle into pocket when he's not looking then fakes a hook. 'I got

him good, straight in the...'

'Nah, listen, listen. That's not - you got to go straight. Jab to the face, right in the eye.' Luke looking up street, sees others approaching. 'I'll show you.'

'Nah, I'll show you.' Rae sticks her hands out in front of her. 'Slap it.'

'Get away.' Luke takes steps out of alley.

Lolita hugs her bottle, moving on the spot. 'Mu, you've got a Restorative tomorrow.'

'So?'

Rae distracts Luke with the slap game. Luke pretends to jab her and she flinches, ending in hook and jab combinations, all ending in the air.

'So, you can't.'

'Can't what? I'm all good. Happy drunk.' Smiling as the white boy and his girlfriend cross the dead-end. 'Ab Origene Justice. They'll let me off with a warning. Still too young for real time. Didn't steal anything good anyway.'

'You can't...' Lita bites her lip. Had him alone all to herself, now he's going to get himself in trouble again. 'Keep getting me in the shit.' Rae the short cousin, wants to be just like her uncle. No class at all. She's not helping, letting Luke roll up to some strangers in school uniform.

'Don't you like Ash and Bernie? You act like you don't sometimes,' Amy asked staring straight ahead of her.

Olly sighed, 'It's not that I don't like them. I don't understand them sometimes. It's just the age difference.'

'But we get along...just.'

'No we don't,' Olly joked.

'Well, not recently, but that's not my fault.'

'I've got a lot on my plate.'

'We all do. The least you can do is not make it hard for me to make friends.'

Olly reached over his sister's head and grabbed her shoulder. He pulled her in for an awkward walking hug. 'It's not personal. Once the Stage Challenge is over it's back to study, back to the real world.'

'Back to sneaking off?'

'No.'

'You pretend like no one noticed. Mum might not want to ask questions, but it's pretty weird that's all. It's hard to not talk about it.'

'With who? Your friends?'

'No.'

'They like to drop hints like they know something. Everyone likes to think that gossip is the real world. I'm surprised you and Mum don't gossip behind my

back.'

They paused to cross the busy road. Cars with open windows roared past with radios blaring advertisements.

Both had been raising their voices over the noise of traffic, but down the cul de sac they brought the volume back to normal for fear of sounding upset with each other. It wasn't the thing to do, being seen arguing on the street, even in this beaten-up neighbourhood.

'You're supposed to be a good example. Not like Dad.'

'I'm not...'

'I saw you outside that kid's playcentre.'

'What do you mean? It's a café too. I like coffee.'

'Stop making jokes. You were there to meet someone and they weren't from school.'

'And that's a good thing, because our school is full of prudes...'

'So, I'm a prude.'

Olly looked Amy up and down with a raised eyebrow waiting until he got a reaction. She punched his arm and he pretended to be hurt thinking he was lightening the mood. 'Did that make you feel better, using your fists?'

'Knock it off. I'm serious. You're not invisible in this...town, suburb, whatever. Not even if you go out to the shopping centre. If *I* saw you than who else saw you?'

'I haven't seen her for like a year.'

Amy could see he looked a little down about it, but she couldn't feel bad for him. 'You're exaggerating. The fact that you haven't seen her is a good thing. You've been a lot nicer. You stay at church for the rest of the meetings rather than disappear. Mum is a lot happier.'

Olly couldn't concentrate. Ahead of them was some aggressive-looking characters. He knew they were walking into trouble yet his feelings were stirred.

'I was seeing someone.'

'Seeing? Is that what you call it?'

'I can do what I want with...'

'A teacher? Go on, what were you going to say? It wasn't going to be teacher was it? Cause she's not a teacher now. She's away on maternity leave. Do you know how hard it is to keep this stuff to myself?'

'Bro, bro wassup?' Luke put out his hand and predicted Olly wouldn't take it. He grabbed Olly's hand and made him shake it. 'That's better, bro. We all friends round here.'

Amy recoiled when Luke turned to her and breathed in her direction. Rae

came up behind Luke and threw an arm around him. The two of them stared and staggered together, with Lolita walking around in circles in the distance.

Olly finally uttered the awkward phrase, 'Yeah. What's up? Just walking home.'

'Yeah same, same. Oh, I am home, sorta. You're kinda walking through my neighbourhood. That's cool. We were just having some celebrations. Having a few drinks.'

'Oh yeah, what are you celebrating?' Olly regretted asking immediately.

Luke grabbed him around the shoulder. It was uncomfortable enough to force him to try and walk away, but Luke held on and they spun around together as if they were best friends walking out of a bar.

Amy stepped nervously back and forth to avoid being stood on. 'Can we just walk home please?' She asked, but no one was listening to her.

'Oh, I got let off, again. Burglary, again. Gotta pay back some money – shit-all really – to some dick. Stole this whole heap of stuff, eh Lita, and it was all old shit.'

Lolita looked embarrassed or just impatient. She wanted to add how he had got all the small kids in the house to help him, how they had one by one taken some small item back to the house like a line of ants – not to mention how he threw one of them through the window he had just smashed so the kid could unlock the door.

When she came over all the neighbour's belongings were pulled out of Luke's room again with the small kids' help and piled in the lounge. They had argued for a bit and she ended up walking out with Luke with a sports bag forced into her arms. So she supposed he could say it was a whole heap and that she had helped, but only because his uncle and aunt were overreacting.

'Went round all the traders, couldn't sell nothing, eh Lita. Then they stop us in the station wagon. Hard to lie when you're caught like that. Still, we're all good. Just baby steps really. Lucky they wanted nothing more than a Restorative, but then the dick didn't come anyway. Far, that was ages ago.'

'And still celebrating,' Olly said almost in a headlock.

Rae was actually trying to pull Luke off Olly for a moment, thinking this taller white boy might start something up. Luke may have forgotten what he was doing. She then stopped them by standing in front with her hands out ready for the slap game.

Olly focused on the hands as the relief from being let go by Luke set in. One hand was covered by her sleeve and he could just see the reason why. It was slightly malformed, enough for her to want to hide it even though she was initiating some silly game. She must have been drunk also. How old could she

have been? Olly wondered if Amy saw the hand too - she'd be horrified.

Then came the fake punch. Rae made it look like she was going to punch him. Amy had held her breath, but her brother had not flinched at all, holding his ground it seemed. Amy figured this was part of their game. They must have liked to play fight - maybe they were brother and sister also. She took a calmer breath as Rae and Luke laughed to each other, then Luke took over.

Olly could just about remember to play this game. With his friends there wasn't a need to compare good reflexes. That was all he thought there was to the game after all. You put your finger tips together and made it look like you were going to slap the other's hand and if the other flinched or pulled their hands away that was as good as losing. The point was to successfully slap the other's hand before they could pull away. Olly grew tired of it fast, and thought he'd let Luke win.

The real punch was like a lightning bolt had struck him through the eye socket. Blackness with a flash of unreal light and then momentary disorientation. Olly backed away and put out his arms while his sister called out something incomprehensible. Crisp focus returned through a fog of moving spots and all he could see was the drunken freak looking at his eye like he was watching the sun rise.

Lolita had pulled at Luke's arm, judged his reaction, and then pushed her weight onto him forcing him aside. The brother and sister moved together across the grass, across the debris from the giant eucalyptus and its hazardous roots, navigating the uneven concrete like it was battle ground.

They had not noticed Rae's aggressive posturing or pretend fighting moves behind their backs. Had it not been for Lolita they wondered what would have happened. Apart from feeling as if his skull had a dent in it, Olly was unharmed - no blood, nothing broken. It would take a good few minutes before his rage caught up with him. Amy just wanted to go home and made it clear at the mere suggestion that he should go back there.

Thinking that for every grievance with these types of people there was always a call-out Lolita dragged Luke home, leaving Rae with the borrowed bottle of whisky and the remainder of the wine. She stashed them under her hoodie and walked over to the park.

An hour or so later she'd make her way in the direction of home, stop outside the corrugated iron fence and struggle to stop herself from falling over with dizziness. She would resist taking deep breaths, choosing to fight it off in Rae-style by kicking the overgrown grass. Voices from behind the fence would signal that they were having another party. She wouldn't get far. There was no point in knocking on that fence.

She would try to work through the nausea by sitting on the kerb. Sitting and then leaning over, still without vomiting. And then lying in the dark, hidden on one side by the overgrown verge and on the other side by car parts in the gutter. She might have started choking an hour or just a few minutes before, but either way she wouldn't regain consciousness before the car wheel finished her off.

‘THE MYSTERIOUS QUALITY’

Andy had made a quick visit to the town centre. He carried with him a backpack and inside was the maximum amount he could withdrawal from the ATM. When he found Andre again they were both caught off guard. Andre looked as if he was close to tears, but smiled and said, ‘There you are,’ as if he was only casually relieved. Andy who now carried with him more money than they would both have made in a fortnight knew better than to be cautious of his friend - the thought still came to mind to keep the money hidden, it was an automatic impulse learned through travel where only cash would do.

They walked as Andre, now wearing as awful-looking a shirt as Andy, explained, ‘I was almost there bro. I had the screwdriver in my hand. Pulled it out from the sand and walked around the house, just one minute from getting to the car. Then someone pulled off the road and onto the grass and came driving up to the house.’

‘Really?’ His uncle, Andy thought, but resisted the urge to go running back to the family now.

‘I dropped the screwdriver and ran for the beach, bro. They weren’t your family that’s for sure. Ab Origene, bro. The new rich.’

Andy was speechless. He didn’t know where to start.

‘I feel bad for oldballs back there, but he’ll be alright eh? They won’t throw his old ass in jail because of what we did eh?’

Shaking his head, Andy said, ‘They might have sold up. That was the only holiday home our family ever had though. Times couldn’t be that bad.’

‘Yeah they could. We’ve you been?’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Bro, they tried to make that unemployment shit go away. Thought they could make everyone believe things were going well for the country. Food prices, taxes, all that. Then the riots. They were pulling people out of their houses, the rich ones near the city. Ab Origene gangs - they’re the reason the movement got

started. Back there, I could tell by the flash car they were driving - I bet they were just the kids, richer and more powerful than they can handle, driving up to their holiday home repossessed from the evil colonial owners - but really just some place to party on the weekend.'

'Ab Origene? I thought it was a joke.'

'They were a tribe, not a joke at all. The first settlers. One thousand years ago - little brother, Viliami, told me they teach you all about it in school. You learn more about that than you do about the great wars, bro. Most young kids think the great wars were in New Zealand and that's what made Aotearoa. They changed the name of the country and then everyone thinks everything has been reset, even history.'

'What about my parent's house?'

'They sold up fast - that was back when the gangs were actually paying for the properties. Don't get me wrong. I never called myself Ab Origene. Uncle Stan filled out the forms, paid the fee, now they own him, but at least he's a land owner. That was after all what people wanted the most, just to finally own a piece of land in the country of their birth. Really it was bound to happen. It just meant people had to believe the new history. There was a lot of people willing to believe it.'

'To believe what exactly?'

'That the Ab Origene were the first ones in New Zealand, that they owned it, and that they had every right to take it back. Unoriginals, eh? Proud to be unoriginal,' Andre said, half joking and half sincere. 'I thought you knew all that stuff and you were making some bold statement.'

'Yeah? Nah, it was just a stupid name, but even that name's not original. I looked it up ages ago - there's like a dozen bands already called The Unoriginals.'

Andre didn't care. For him it was their name - a band without instruments, with direction but no destination, side-lining as a matter of course. 'That's us, bro. You know I would have come and picked you up when I got the car started, eh?'

Andy had to accept it as truth, no matter how it was unlikely, and hid the fact that he wouldn't have wanted him to pick him up at all. He now had even more reason not to return to the city. 'Thanks bro.'

'But for now we should walk faster, as far as we can without stopping. Because by now they'll be cops or even wardens at the house wondering why this old man drove himself in a stolen car all the way to Waipu just to coma-out in the back seat.'

'After breaking in.'

‘After breaking in, yeah.’

‘Shit,’ Andy stopped walking and let it sink in. ‘What have we done? Do you think he’ll remember us and...’

‘I don’t know. That’s why we’ve gotta move.’

Maria never made eye contact with Andre, yet despite this he felt like she was watching his every move. For the first time in his life this attention didn’t make him feel singled out for being big, dark, or scary - instead he was excited by it. She called him by his name, played uninterested, yet showed a knack for remembering everything he said and noticing everything he did. Andre stared at Andy until he relented.

‘OK, we could stay for dinner,’ Andy said, dropping his backpack and began running through time and distance. They had just finished lunch, and had been railroaded into helping in the garden, but he was still hell-bent on getting back on the road, or beach as it was - for now though it was probably best to stay off it. If anyone had noticed them and their slow beach walk it would make them very easy to find. At least this way they stayed hidden and almost protected by this quiet and helpless woman.

She disappeared into the kitchen and Andre whispered hoarsely across the room. ‘If she still thinks we’re backpackers and they ask her if she’s seen us then they’ll be looking for us on the streets or at the campground.’

‘Then you’ll need a backpack then won’t you. One small backpack between two guys is not really backpacking.’

‘Why don’t we stay the night like she said we could?’

‘Because I might change my mind in the morning.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she’s nice.’

‘Yeah, she is, isn’t she? Why don’t you buy some cheap backpacks with all your loads of cash?’

‘Maybe I will.’

When Maria returned she brought refreshments. The two of them started to drink, Andre choking at first, then Andy.

‘What’s that?’

‘Mead,’ she answered plainly. ‘Paul, down the road keeps on bringing me bottles. The fridge is full of it. If you like it you can help yourself.’

Andre’s face spoke for him, but Andy, who was treated to his fair share of eye contact, confirmed his interest. ‘Thank you - that is...something else.’ For those brief moments when he couldn’t help his sincerity showing through, her eyes told him of a hard life, but she was in no way as flaky as he had judged her

to be on the beach.

When she had found them they had only just been chased off by the local madman, Te I Ching. It was not on the way north, but on the way back south after they had seen the expansive refinery blocking the passage north and turned back to Ruakaka for food, when they had found Te I's shack attended. Even though the man was stark naked, sun-damaged, and hair overgrown, the shack had almost looked welcoming, but only to Andre. Andy, as soon as he was looked at up close, gave Te I such a bad feeling that he had to be chased off immediately. Andre was still welcome to stay, but the thought of hanging around with the naked man was too unsettling.

Maria confirmed what Andy had thought - that the man was a mad racist - explaining that he lived on the beach after his house burnt down, called himself Te I Ching and spoke like he was a wise man. To the township he was a mad vagrant with an antisocial personality disorder.

Maria on the other hand was perfectly nice, and made up for the town madman, welcoming them back to her bach for lunch. She may have smoked like the red and white chimneys of the refinery, and spoke in old sayings that neither of them understood, but she had only shown them hospitality.

When Andy left to refill his glass with Maria's almost aggressive permission, Andre couldn't help himself explaining, 'You looked like an angel on the beach...after that half-shrivelled old naked man.'

She laughed it off, ignoring the childish tone of his comment. 'Well, I've never been called that, darling. I've often been called names but not that one.'

'I mean the whole beach is beautiful, looking south that is, but looking north, yeah, well it's like the worst thing I've ever seen.' He tried to laugh to cover the brutal honesty of his words.

'You're not wrong. But hey, there's jobs for the locals in that plant. We all need work. We all need security.'

Andre nodded feeling a little light-headed and as if her words had meaning he couldn't define.

'Yep. I tell ya, we all can't go around backpacking our money and youth away now can we?'

On that note, Andy rejoined them with a whole bottle behind his back, 'Speaking of which, I should get down to the hostel and pick up our backpacks.'

'Hostel?' Maria echoed knowing full well there was no hostel in town.

'No, the other place, just down the road a bit. It looks like a hostel. Next to the tree.'

'Tree?' Maria just looked at him as if he was a joker, shaking her head with a grin on her face. 'You two are a pair, aren't you?'

Andy raised his glass to distract her, speaking with a Scottish accent, 'Drink your Mead up, Andre. Make you big and strong. Oop, look at the size of you - looks like you've had too much!'

Andy walked down the beach with his bottle and wondered if he'd made the right decision. Where the dunes were parted so you could walk over to the township was where old Te I Ching had built his shack. Not only did he think that it was a bad idea to stay with a local and that the backpack story had only made it harder to seem authentic, but now he had the interest of one of the more paranoid individuals in the area. Who knew what fuss this guy could make when he didn't like someone?

Te I walked out of the shack, thankfully in a pair of black stubbies, and stood in Andy's way as if to say this was his town and that he was trespassing.

'So, it's the boy with wide open eyes, eh? Back again at my door.'

Andy thought he heard some distant Asian accent in his voice, but he couldn't tell with the heavy rural drawl.

'Oh, but this time...' he said and lifted the bottle, 'He comes bearing a gift.'

'Paulie's mead. How unoriginal for this town. Lucky for you I like Paulie's mead.' Te I took the bottle and turned his back to the stranger.

Happy to be rid of the stuff now that he had to walk into town, Andy figured he'd better get moving. He found a store which sold camping supplies, brought two backpacks to the checkout and finding the price a little hard to stomach looked around for the cheapest things to fill them with. On a nearby stand he found a range of inflatables and took a couple of items at random.

Andre looked at Maria's view trying to make out islands on the horizon. 'How far away are those?'

Maria had one eye on the computer. A sports betting application was open and she did well to pretend she was not distracted. 'A lot further than you think. A local guy, Charlie Peterson, not much smaller than you thought he could kayak out there. Thought he'd get famous or something.' She grimaced as she watched the horses finish their race, tapped some keys and then stood up, sighing. 'He got his face in the paper alright. Got blown forty Ks north and they had a helicopter out looking for him for about five or six hours. I guess if the wind hadn't changed on him - but even then, what an idiot. His poor mum.'

'Looks achievable though.'

Maria snuck up and stood by him at the window. 'Achievable maybe for a high achiever. He was still living at home at the time, unemployed, unemployable, biiiig stoner although he already had a few screws loose. Ended up with hypothermia. Nearly froze his crankshaft off.' She looked down as she spoke.

Andre took a drink and looked at her, sincerely worried for the idiot, 'Really?'

'No, but I bet it could.'

'Freeze it off?'

She silently affirmed his fears, nodding and slightly gasping, then returned to her application. 'You want to watch the rugby.'

Andre pulled himself away from the window and inspected the rest of the house. His eyes barely took in the faces in the photographs, being someone else's memories in a blur. 'Nah, I don't really. Sorry if you wanted to - you can put it on.'

'No, I just leave it running. It's a bit like betting on horses. A bit like watching a bunch of well-hung stallions run around. I just watch the end.'

'You have a nice house. Nice lounge.'

'Nice bedroom.'

'Nice bedroom.' Andre looked but didn't see anything nice. 'Yeah, I guess.'

'Are you eyeing up my bed?'

Andre was confused. He didn't even see the bed, just seeing a basic room.

Maria took a few steps towards him, looking him over. 'That reminds me - I'd better get a lamb roast out for dinner.' She caught his eye and put her cup down. 'We could you know.'

'Know what?'

'Try it out.'

'The bed?' Andre smiled and giggled. 'Why not?'

Maria pushed him inside. Andre felt the bed because he presumed that's what she wanted him to do. She pushed a few shoes aside and sighed. 'Make yourself comfortable. I'll just get the meat out and grab my ciggies.'

Andy walked back to the counter and asked if he could purchase what seemed to be one inflatable alligator and a pink pool lounge chair. The store owner may have looked closer at what the man was buying if it had not been for the odd couple who clattered through the door with buckets, towels and window cleaning equipment.

'Morning Bruce.'

'Fred, Nancy.'

Fred proceeded to wet the front doors down while setting the buzzer off over and over, all while trying to explain something Andy could barely make out.

Bruce shook his head, saying with a cheeky smile, 'Couldn't have happened to nicer people. Sorry you're not a supporter are you?' He asked Andy.

'What? What are we talking about?'

'A group down the way, an AO group, collectively own a bach down Waipu,

had it broken into last night by who'd they say Fred?

Nancy piped up as Fred couldn't hear over the buzzer he was setting off. 'Bloody John Benjamin impersonator.'

'Must have gone off the rails since he lost his job. You can't imitate a dead man, can ya?'

'Oh yes you can,' Nancy interjected. 'Fred's pretty good at it.'

Fred echoed adding his own incomprehensible joke, laughing and sharing in what seemed to be a general bad disregards for other's bad luck.

'So you're not then?' The owner asked Andy.

Every time the abrupt buzzer was set off Andy flinched as if it was drilling into some part of his brain. He resisted the urge to panic. 'Not?'

'AO?'

'Not that I know of.'

He nodded looking in Andy's eyes. 'Too bloody right. We'll all be moving south at this rate.'

'The hell we are,' Fred said from somewhere behind the racks and carried on mumbling to Nancy.

Andy took the money from his backpack just as he had when he bought the backpacks. He hid his sweating and shaking well.

The owner pulled his chin into his neck, asking harmlessly, 'You got your life savings in there?'

'I've got *someone's* life savings in there,' Andy said laughing to cover his shaky voice, caught up with the informal flowing banter which must be their everyday conversation. He was right to make what would have been a vague joke as it tickled the owner who had his own laugh to himself.

Fred worked his way down the store. 'They said he broke a window but didn't take anything. Fell asleep drunk in the backseat of a stolen car though, so how does he explain that?'

'He's got a lot of answering to do,' Nancy added.

'Too right.' Bruce agreed, handing the bag over to Andy. 'There you are.'

Andy couldn't stop the words from slipping out. 'We've all been there though.'

It was a comment that brought the window-washers to a stop. Bruce too waiting for an explanation.

On the spot, Andy looked around waiting to be saved from his own set-up. He took the bag and said, 'That...drunk.'

Bruce shook his head, 'Aw, bloody oath.'

Fred and Nancy too nodding, going back to their business. 'Too right, too right.'

Bruce continued saying, 'Once after one too many, I woke up in church.'

'Jeez,' Fred yelled.

A sweating Andy tried to control his shallow breathing and made for the exit.

'Once after one too many,' Nancy yelled in response, pointing at Fred. 'I ended up married to that!'

'OK, have a good one, people,' Andy said backing out and gasping for breath between fake laughs.

Andre was glowing also, not only because of mild intoxication, but because there was a roast on and because Andy wouldn't be eating a single slice of meat. The big man stood up, wavered a little, and headed for the bathroom just as Andy came back with the two large backpacks and his one small backpack slung around the front.

'Hell, not bad for a vegetarian.' Maria said suddenly from her armchair, visibly shocked that he could carry all that weight from the centre of town. 'Speaking of which, is there anything else I can make for you for tea?'

Andy thought about it, dropping the big backpacks by the breakfast bar and hiding the smaller one, now even heavier thanks to another trip to an ATM, behind the other armchair. He then slumped into the seat as if he was exhausted and let out a fake sigh of relief. He simply shook his head with a Buddha-like smile.

Even though she was at least in her mid to late forties, nothing made her look older than reclining in her armchair with a mobile phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He then wondered what had brought her to get changed into a dressing gown and slippers as well.

'Do you mind if the potatoes are cooked in the meat juice. I just thought I'd make a roast seeing as Shane and the kids will be arriving tomorrow and it'd be good to have some cold meat on hand.'

'Shane?' Andy asked, squinting and scanning the photos in their tiny frames scattered across the china cabinet and shelves. No one looked like a 'Shane' but then who did?

'He brings his kids every now and then, bless him. Not one for kids myself. But Shane and I have been seeing each other for a while now, so it comes with the territory, I guess.'

'What's that?' Andre asked as he entered the lounge, distracted by the backpacks.

Andy nodded as if he knew what she meant and for some reason pictured a man his age.

Maria shifted and launched herself out of the seat with one bare leg stretching for the floor. She crossed the room and asked if they wanted drinks saying she'd

have to go out to the garage for another bottle or two.

Thanking her while picking one of the backpacks up and watching her leave, Andre was surprised at the weight.

Andy called him out and pulled his arm to bring him closer while he whispered, 'You thought they'd be heavier? I had to fill them with something, so I blew up a couple of inflatables. Turns out I didn't need to bother. They think it was Chris Ridge, the impersonator, who broke in. They're not looking for us.'

'That's good,' Andre said, smiling. 'So we might be able to stay here a bit longer.'

'No, I don't think that'll be possible. She'll have a couple of kids running around here tomorrow - not a good idea, eh?'

'Eh? What kids? Whose kids?'

'A guy called Shane.'

'What? I thought she was...'

'Why are you so surprised?'

Andre heard her coming back inside and straightened up. She was singing to herself as the gown swayed and another bottle of mead slid over the counter.

After dinner Andy found out just how comfortable the armchairs could be. He fell asleep after being left alone by the others who had snuck off outside. Their private conversation had gone on for a while with Maria smoking and Andre scowling, until she undid her dressing gown tie and edged up beside him. They would tiptoe through the lounge and into her bedroom while Andy slept, closing the door silently behind them.

Apologising for waking him, even though she hadn't, Maria marched into the kitchen in her dressing gown again and boiled some water. Andy, who had spent the whole night in one position, attempted to sit up and let the armchair do it for him. He staggered, feeling grubby from still being in the same clothes, and reached the window for some fresh air.

He opened the curtains, attempting to thank her for everything, and then cleared his throat and tried again. The sun was much higher than he expected, but he was still able to kneel bathed in its rays. When he opened his eyes for his last moment of sleepy serenity he noticed the red truck which was parked up next to the fence below. He squashed his face against the glass and looked down at the scruffy man with his dark facial hair and unfriendly expression. This man pulled a bag out of the passenger side and two kids of roughly seven to ten years of age followed the bag out.

'Does Shane have grey in his beard and drive a truck?'

'Depends,' Maria answered, and then choked on the thought dropping a

teaspoon. 'Is he here already?'

In a flash she moved across the lounge, confirmed for herself, and skipped back to her bedroom without saying a word.

Like a reptile Andy couldn't move from his spot in the sun, that was until Maria flew back out into the lounge to ask him if he could go downstairs with his backpack and climb out of the spare room window.

'I don't want to put him on the back foot,' was all she said to share her urgency.

Andy was caring little to think deeper as he kept the blanket wrapped around him like a shield and slowly took to the stairs with both backpacks. As he entered the spare room it became all too clear that the pangs of urgency would be all Andre and he would stomach for breakfast this morning.

Andre wasn't in the spare room. Here there were two perfectly good single beds, made up and unused. Now he was on the back foot realising that he was perhaps trapped in this room with two backpacks and hearing no six foot Polynesian stamping down the stairs was listening so closely to every little sound before an eruption.

There was a sound in the garden outside – a kind of thud followed by the crack of branches. Andy took a sharp breath and tried to see around the corner of the house by opening the window. Both were shocked to see each other, Andre springing sideways as if he'd been caught and Andy as if he should be frightened of this reverse intruder.

'We gotta go,' Andre whispered, limping towards through the trees which caught on the plush blanket he was wrapped in.

Andy pulled the backpacks towards the window. 'Oh? And why would that be?'

'I can't explain it. She just freaked out and asked me to jump out the flippin' window and told me to be quiet about it.'

'Because Shane's here.'

'Who?'

'The guy in the photos.'

'What? What photos?'

'She doesn't want to get caught Andre,' Andy said climbing out the window and pulling the packs after him.

'Who's Shane? Her brother or something?'

Andy pushed him through the garden. Even though he had the order to leave, he now resisted as if he was entitled to the explanation.

'Shhh, are you kidding? Maria's not asking you to leave because her brother came over first thing in the morning.'

They made it to the road and looked for the walkway back to the beach.

‘I’m not really dressed for this bro. I need to go back and get my clothes.’

Andy hesitated and shook his head, imagining Andre climbing out the window in such a panic that he didn’t have the time to collect his clothes. He studied Andre’s face wondering how he could still claim ignorance. ‘Your clothes are either at the top of that tree you fell through or swept under her bed, bro.’

‘I need to go back.’

‘You don’t get that choice.’

‘Why not? I was only sleeping.’

‘In her bed?’

‘Yuh.’

‘With her?’

‘Yuh, I mean nuh.’

They hit sand and Andy felt a welcome relief. Now at least one of them looked like a backpacker and not some idiot on a bender who ended up with no more than a blanket to his name. ‘So you were sleeping with her?’

Andre’s inability to see his actions for what they were was almost convincing. ‘No. I was sleeping in her bed. She just needed to explain that and then we could leave with our stuff.’

Something fell onto the sand at Andre’s feet. He stepped back thinking some bird shit had landed on his foot. Andy looked down and back up at Andre who by then had realised it was not what he had thought and was in fact a condom.

Andy hid his chuckling, turned and started walking north. He looked back to see Andre struggling to figure out how to talk his way around this. Andy talked over him, ‘You’d better get moving. Don’t want Shane to catch up with you.’

Andre walked fast and Andy slapped him on the back, asking, ‘You feel used? You were, bro.’

‘I feel hungry.’

‘There’s some food in my backpack at the top.’

‘Really?’ Andre pulled at the clips, using his elbows to clamp at the blanket.

Andy didn’t stop for him. When he heard the confusion of seeing nothing but a partially inflated alligator he pulled the blanket and ran forward, dropping the blanket on the ground.

Andre, naked and angry, rushed to collect the blanket but was still more annoyed that he couldn’t find the food. ‘Nah, very funny, but where’s the food?’

‘There’s no food,’ Andy said, cackling. ‘Come on, Andre. Wake up. You’re too easy. That is a good quality I suppose, but for now you are taking the ultimate walk of shame.’

Andre stopped and looked through his own pack and found the other inflatable but also a half full bottle of mead which had been stuffed down the side in some panicked attempt to clean up. He let out an angry sigh, fixed his blanket and slowly caught up with Andy who continued chuckling like a fool.

‘He likes you bro - you go first,’ Andy demanded.

‘Why me?’

‘You’re closer to a brother than I am, in a religious sense. Give him the mead.’

‘No.’

‘We need a gift in order to go into his territory.’

‘Bro, you said he was Chinese.’

‘Chinese-ish was all I said.’ Andre noticed the flag flying above the shack. ‘Nah, he’s Ab Origene, all the way. You don’t have to be full-blooded apparently.’

Andre stood frozen and shook the bottle as he ranted. ‘He’s Ab Origene and he lives in this shack?’

‘I’m not even Kiwi anymore and this guy is Ab Origene. I would have thought he’s more Tauwi than I am, but that’s just the way it works apparently.’ Andy looked over the shack as they started closing in. A solar panel rested on the roof. ‘Don’t disrespect his shack. We don’t know what we’re really dealing with here.’

They soon realised if there was any respect to be given it wasn’t in raving about race or other issues in front of the only shack likely to take Andre in. Andre’s suggestion was that they avoid eye contact as he placed the bottle on the ground and backed off with Andy until they were at a safe distance. It was up to Te I to accept it, but there was no ceremonial dance or chant - he merely stepped out in his tight shorts and walked over to the bottle and took it.

When Te I returned to his shack without a word, Andre was so close to yelling at the man he had to be pulled back by Andy. A few flax genital shields hanging from the sun shade distracted him from his frustration. Te I stuck his head back out and looked at them, saying, ‘Are you comin’ in or what?’

Te I poured the mead into three odd cups and left them to be collected by his guests.

‘What’s this made from white boy?’ He asked Andy.

Andy stuttered as he took a cup. ‘Honey?’

‘Honey from where?’

‘I don’t know. It’s just honey.’

‘You keep dropping this off all the while you don’t even know where it

comes from. Suppose you think the honey just bought at the supermarket. Honey from different sources changes the flavour.'

'Just tastes sweet to me,' Andre said looking around in the hope that there was some food.

Te I looked at Andre and burst into laughter. 'Where's your clothes Tiny?'

Andy echoed. 'Yeah, where are your clothes Andre?'

'In Maria's bedroom,' Andre mumbled.

Te I flicked his eyebrows at him. 'Did she have a good time, eh?'

Andre could only be honest, 'Well, yeah, she had a good time...and then her boyfriend showed up in this morning.'

'Aah, and you get forced to go native,' Te I said looking at the flax leaves, then slapped his thigh and pointed at Andre. 'Have I got something for you then.'

From out of a giant woven plastic bag he pulled a flax skirt and threw it next to Andre. Andy didn't know whether to laugh or be offended for Andre, but then in Te I's shack it was Te I's rules. This could only be seen as a sincere gesture - Andre would reluctantly agree with that. In his own time Andre pulled the skirt on and thanked Te I, again mumbling his words so they were almost unrecognisable.

'You're welcome,' Te I said, joyously shaking his matted hair and getting back into position next to his cup. His squeaky and croaky voice then asked, 'What the hell yous doing here anyway?'

Without a hint of self-esteem, Andre flopped his arms about and scratched his neck, saying, 'I was naked and needed...'

Andy was quick to read the old man. Te I hadn't touched the mead and Andy began to get playful with the contradictory man. 'Here? On the beach? Ruakaka? Or Earth?'

'Here!' Te I yelled, suddenly angry and picking up sand with his fingers to let it drop out with a flourish.

Andre jumped in, sensing only that Te I might be defensive considering his rude welcome the day before. 'Umm, we're walking around the island. This is how far we got. We hit the refinery over there and thought we'd check out Ruakaka instead. Disturbed you sunbathing the other day and now we're... here...in need of...' Andre searched for words while searching with his eyes for any food whatsoever.

'Seeking wise council?' Te I finished Andre's sentence for him.

The two of them looked blankly at Te I Ching, hardly agreeing, but both thinking they should agree.

'Tell me more about this walk? You all looking for something?'

Andre thought for a moment, pushing his hunger away, and the words were coming to him like raindrops which he stared and marvelled at until he spoke. 'It's like that book they get you to read in school, Of Mice and Men...'

Andy put up his hand while he cleared the air and his throat, 'It's something like it I guess, but not.' He looked at Te I and lowered his upper half to emphasise his sincerity. 'Personally, I was looking for something alright - I'm looking for a new land that doesn't cut its people into two for the sake of past mistakes...'

He was now interrupted by Te I with a flat hand and equally sincere expression. 'Who are you?' He left the question hanging until Andy was prepared to answer and then interrupted again. 'Past mistakes, m-m-m-... whatever. Is there one plant growing here or more than one?'

'I...'

'More than one. So forget about it. Now there are two strong plants.'

'But there used to be one plant.'

'What is one plant? How can there be one plant...ever? Plants grow side by side, not one.'

'But the one plant used to be made up of many different plants and...' Andy shook his head not reading any sense in his own words. 'We used to be Kiwi, did we not?'

'Who we?'

'Kiwi.'

Te I screwed up his face. 'Who's Kiwi?'

Andy gave up, throwing his hands in the air. 'When you go overseas, the first thing they say when they hear you from here is: oh, you're Kiwi!'

Disconnected from Andy's rant, Te I continued, 'I don't remember that. I don't remember many different plants.'

'That's what they told us we were on TV, radio, films and...'

'I don't watch TV.'

'...adverts.'

'I don't watch no TV.'

Andre said as if to no one, 'I do,' laughing it off as if it lightened the mood.

The old man scanned the piece of driftwood used as a table, saw that their cups needed refilling and did so, changing the tone as he spoke, 'You see out on the horizon - the islands out there?'

Andre had to control himself from throwing the cup of mead onto the sand and demanding some food. It was customary to offer food, wasn't it? He looked at Andy who was staring out to sea and wondered why he wasn't as hungry.

'Islands named Hen and Chickens, big one the hen, small ones the chickens -

out there is Mauitaha, closest of the chickens. Mauitaha is a wildlife sanctuary... made for the Pacific rat!' He couldn't help but laugh to himself. 'No joking - this is the sanctuary for the Ab Origene story. See the Pacific rat story followed the Ab Origene story when they first come to this land, and now we wanna protect even the pests that we tried to take off all the other islands because it means so much to us, this story. Why is that story so important? Only the original people can call themselves original and make up whatever they want and call it meaningful. People who come after bring colour but original people set up the easel and the canvas. Who are we to argue? It's a nice rat compared to that Norwegian rat - now, *that* rat is a pest. Pacific rat shares a story - Ab Origene liked to eat it, and make clothes out of it - Tauivi like to study it, pull it apart, compare genetic make-up with other island - whole other story! Point is: you say there were many plants, but TV sold you one plant, and that was *your* one plant. Two plants now, two stories, and maybe when you both grow up and become men, maybe then you will really see more than two plants.'

'I...' Andy held his fury inside as Te I interrupted one last time.

'If you want to become men,' he said, leaning over and pulling one side of the flax skirt up in the air. 'And maybe you're...halfway there. You don't go round the outside - you don't go around the edge - you go to the heart and that's where you feel the pulse of life pumping, pumping...'

Andre was nodding along with the pumping and had to ask, 'Where's the heart?'

'I told you! From here, the heart is out there...Mauitaha! When you row all the way there you'll know who you are.'

'A sanctuary for Pacific rats?' Andre asked.

'Yup.'

Now Andy shifted around impatiently, struggling to not ask, 'And what about...'

'You? Go to the next island over: Lord Malice Island. The sanctuary for possums and rabbits, those that followed the migration of the British.'

Te I kept a straight face, but Andy could hardly hide his doubt laughing under the cover of a cough, and following it up saying, 'And on what island should they put the Kiwis?'

'Who is Kiwi?' Andre asked, eyes popping out of his head at Andy.

'Who are *we*??' Te I asked Andre, then answered his own question equally in jest, saying, 'Yes...but no.'

Andre paraphrased himself trying to not sound as vague as Te I, 'Who is Kiwi *now* I mean?'

'I am,' Andy said assertively putting his cup down and shifting onto his knees

so he could leave. 'I know I am because I went round the world and that's what they called me. But then I came back home and they called me something else.'

Andy felt the strong wind hit him and with the slap to the face realised what he had left behind. Andre followed him out, apologising to Te I, and asking, 'Where are you going?'

'I need to get my backpack, bro.'

'Forget your backpack.'

'My...necklace is in it.'

'Aw, forget it man!' Andre paused, pulling the flax skirt up and walking out of the blanket. 'Don't leave me here with...' He pointed instead of finishing.

Andy walked away saying, 'You'll find something to keep you occupied. Talking shit with the oracle back there.'

He felt an arm on his shoulder which stopped him. Andre tried to block his way and looked him in the eyes. '*Don't* leave me with him...and with no food, bro!'

'That's why I need that backpack, alright? I'll be honest with you - I have thousands in that backpack that I drew out of my account.'

'Where did you get thousands from? You steal it from Rosana?'

'No I didn't steal it, but all I can say is I didn't earn it. It was reparation, over and above the value of the things that were taken.'

'Eh?'

'Some dick burgled my flat and ended up with a whole lot of junk. He was forced to repay the full value which was not even close to what they were really worth - being hand-me-down pieces of crap - but then the payments didn't stop, they kept coming while I was away and I didn't know about it. So, call it a fee, but I withdrew the money and it's behind a lazyboy at your girlfriend's house.'

Andre stepped out of his way and made the move back to the shack, rubbing his arms and looking out to sea. 'Shhhuh, you said you didn't earn it, but you're going to earn it now.' He left him and walked into the shack, sure that he could withstand hunger pains considering Andy might return with enough cash to buy him breakfast and a new set of clothes.

'That's a brave man,' he said to Te I who remained in a reclined position next to the driftwood coffee table where his full cup of mead sat. 'You're not drinking.'

Te I watched the big man sit, lifted his wrinkled arm and moved the cup to Andre, 'I don't drink.'

'Now let's talk about how you get to Mauitaha.'

Instead of responding to what sounded like method for suicide, Andre lifted the cup and took a drink thanking him with a subtle gesture. He didn't drink,

Andre wondered, 'Is it against your religion?'

Te I looked confused. 'My religion? What religion?'

'You've got all these hanging things, you kind of talk like Confucius - you don't drink - I just thought you were some Asian religion.'

'I don't drink because I can't.'

'Oh, alcohol abuse. Yeah that's why my religion doesn't like it either. People do some messed up things.'

'No, I can't physically drink.'

'I can't drink a lot either. It gives me a headache. Makes me feel shit. Yesterday was my first hangover. It sucked.'

Te I shook his head, gracefully lifted the same arm and pushed his hand through his chest. The hand disappeared into his body until the click of a button could be heard and the exterior that had been Te I disappeared completely leaving only an afterimage. Andre put his cup down and then flinched just a little. He cleared his throat and then yelled as he pushed back with his feet, rolling over himself to exit the shack.

Andy could see a disgusting kissing session in the backyard from the roadside. He had waited long enough and made his way to the corner of the section, to the spare room window and then into the house.

Keeping an eye on the couple through the kitchen door he began searching for some food but forgot that search as he became aware of the two boys playing games in the corner. They both wore wireless headsets and randomly grunted comments at each other as they battled on the silent monitor in front of them. He stepped over to the armchair without even breathing and took the backpack by the strap.

To his left, in plain sight Andre's unmistakeable shirt had been placed on the bed. Andy took a deep breath and looked behind him to see if the couple were still locked in their romantic embrace then pulled the necklace from the backpack and put it in his pocket.

'Who are you?' The older of the two boys said, echoed by his brother. 'And why are you wearing that stupid shirt?'

Andy with a cold chill over his body thought for a moment. 'I'm a performer.' If anything, his panicked thoughts concluded, he could throw them lies as he inched towards the stairs. 'A musician. A famous musician's...backing musician...guitar player?'

'Hmmm.' The older one paused the game, took off his headset and crept like a lizard across the lounge.

Andy looked over to him and the boy covered his buck-toothed grin pretending he wasn't looking at him and the backpack. The younger brother had

followed, but sincerely interested, had to ask, 'Where's your musical instrument?'

He ignored the littler boy, reading the older boy's face and getting nothing from him. When he leaned away to catch a glimpse of the couple still in the same position outside and then turned back, the two boys were now grinning and giggling, faces as welcoming as gargoyles, the older boy holding something behind his back and moving around him with side-steps. Andy could only turn and watch him, and smacked his knee into the desk while he caught a glimpse of the material in his hand. The littler boy then crossed the lounge and pulled the shirt off the bed.

'Oooh, Da-ad,' the boy sang, now walking backwards, waving the material behind his back. 'Found it on Maria's floo-or.'

Thinking he could somehow explain Andy took a few steps through the kitchen coming into Shane and Maria's view, unaware that he had shone the spotlight on himself in the process.

The little boy finished him, throwing the shirt up in the air and parroting, 'Found it on Maria's floor! There's undies as well.'

Andre's underwear was thrust up into the air by the buck-toothed boy like it was a trophy as the shirt came down over his head.

The boys laughed wildly as if they had won a game, and Andy could only look at himself as the loser, realising he now looked like an intruder with a fetish for polyester shirts. By Shane's face it was clear he had known nothing about Andre's actions up until then, and the change to his character was defined by the youngest boy with an annoyingly appropriate, 'Ummmmm!'

Shane moved first. Andy had always frozen during stressful moments, in this moment feeling as if he should be justified in explaining the situation. It could have been only a second of deliberation before Andy threw himself down the stairs and headed for the window, but Shane's face said it all. The grisly man took a knife from the kitchen and followed Andy. By the time he had arrived in the spare room Andy had landed in the flax bush having fumbled with the backpack and lost his grip on the window. He took a fleeting look at the backpack and then the weapon in Shane's hand and rolled out and down the section towards the road.

Andre was already in the water by the time Andy came within earshot. The skirt-wearing man had straddled a sea kayak and was making terrible attempts at digging the paddles into the water. Te I Ching popped his head up and walked to meet Andy at the water's edge pulling the end of a long rope.

'What are you doing!?' Andy yelled.

Andre could barely see him. He yelled back, 'Can't stop!' and focused on not

screaming as the water rose up to his crotch.

‘Maria’s boyfriend is coming to kill me.’ Andy looked down the beach to see a slow-moving truck driving down the edge of the water, Shane visibly holding the knife out of the window no less menacing than if he was running and screaming wildly. ‘In his truck!’

‘Why? What did you do?’ Te I asked, taking his position next to Andy.

‘Nothing. He thinks I slept with Maria.’

‘Hmmm, dying for a friend - very honourable.’

Andy was too dismayed to look at him. He fixed his eyes on the truck and wondered if he should get swimming.

‘Going to the island!’ Andre yelled as if it was not already obvious.

‘No, no, I don’t think you should do that.’ Andy’s opinion didn’t seem to reach Andre and he could barely say it with conviction. He turned to Te I instead, asking, ‘What happened?’

‘I threw the yarrow sticks - his reading doesn’t bode well.’ Te I said, nudging Andy. ‘You’ve got a better chance waiting here.’

‘What do you mean? What are you talking about!?’

‘I threw the sticks before - “it is beneficial to cross the great river” - good reading. He doesn’t like my waka, so he steals one. I threw the sticks again after - “out of harmony with the breath of vacancy, one does not value the nursing mother” - stealing a waka is a bad way to start a voyage.’

The truck was clearly audible now with its ominous crescendos rising above the crashing of the waves.

Te I continued, although Andy could hardly concentrate, ‘Told him to take mine, but I didn’t think he could fit.’

‘I mean why is he doing this?’

‘Going to the island!’ Andre called back as he gathered speed with the receding tide.

‘He seemed to believe I was some holy man.’ Te I had been pulling the rope intermittently and on the end of it now directly behind Andy was a hollowed-out log with a one small oar. Inside the log was one of the large backpacks. ‘Good for fishing - just like the islanders use. Only they don’t take excess baggage like this, but then it’s only a backpack with an inflatable crocodile half-blown up inside it.’

Andy looked it over and then back at truck. There was no decision to be made. If it floated it would be his best option. ‘You mean, just like the Ab Origene used?’

‘I dunno. I’m not Ab Origene.’ He pointed to the flag. ‘That’s just a flag and that’s just a waka. Doesn’t make me AO.’

‘Te I, can I use your waka?’

Te I nodded and pulled it into the water, saying, ‘I don’t think you have the choice and I don’t think you have time for a reading either.’

Andy climbed in wobbling around with an arm on each side. The oar was passed over to him and he thanked Te I as best he could with the waves throwing him around.

‘Don’t thank me yet!’ Te I laughed and pushed at the waka.

‘You sure this is OK!?’

‘Dunno, I never used it. If I wanna fish I use the rod!’

Andy was in no position to hurl abuse at the man. He dug his oar in madly as he firmly believed his life depended on getting to a safe distance. The safe distance unfortunately was nothing of the kind. He could hear the truck pull up and caught a glimpse of the furious man taken a hunting rifle out of a long leather case. While his heart struggled to keep up Andy powered this little waka so quickly he almost caught up to Andre.

Andre himself had been hanging out catching his breath until he also saw the gun come out. Now he pointed the kayak out to sea and purposefully tried to keep Andy between him and the shooter, but as his friend caught up panic took over. ‘Get away!’

‘It’s meant for you, Andre!’

‘Get away man! It’s meant for you actually.’

The two of them burned their adrenalin, crossing each other’s path and arguing, while Shane lowered the rifle and rested it butt down on the sand next to him. He turned to Te I Ching and said, ‘That’ll scare them half the way to Bream Head.’

‘They’re going further than that.’

‘What do they think they’re doing?’

‘The big one is going to Mauitaha and the other is probably going to some island I just made up. Don’t they know a metaphor when they hear it?’

Shane knew who he was talking to, he knew the stories going around the town, but had no idea this man had the power to talk people into acts of idiocy. He both wanted to growl at the madman or laugh with him. He did manage a smile as he rolled a cigarette, rifle barrel tucked under his arm. ‘And why would they be doing that?’

‘Because one’s a king and the other’s a fool.’

‘King? Which one?’

‘The one that actually screwed your missus.’

Shane stared at him with a filter hanging off his lip. ‘And which one was that?’

‘Does it matter? Let him have his day.’

‘King, though? She’s no queen.’

‘Nah, neither king nor fool, they just wanna run from everything. Let them run.’ Te I carried on in his vague way, digging out other mistranslated sayings, looking at the rifle and back up at Shane’s cold, weather-beaten face, taking in every detail until he was satisfied that one man’s laziness was an equal force to another man’s survival instinct. He then sniffed and shook his head, turning around and heading off to his shack muttering, ‘I’m going back to the city - this place is too wild.’

‘You’d better call the search helicopters on these two before you go. Like they did with Charlie Peterson, you fried unit.’

‘Like you care,’ Te I mumbled.

Shane lit his rolled cigarette and nodded once then walked back to his truck.

Andre looked back and found that they were at a safe distance. He caught his breath and waited for Andy, asking, ‘He doesn’t have a boat or a jetski or anything does he?’

‘Don’t know,’ Andy said through heaving breaths. ‘What were you doing out here? You didn’t even know Shane was coming.’

‘Leading the way.’

‘No you weren’t. There was no one to lead.’

‘I was just seeing if it was possible.’

‘To kill yourself?’

‘Te I...’ Andre struggled to put it into words. ‘Te I made it clear that anything was possible. You’ve just got to know when to lead and when to follow.’

‘Bullshit! Te I speaks bullshit. He bullshitted you and now we’re out here.’

‘Now we’re alive and away from the freak back there because of Te I and because I led. I feel it now, that belief. He was a holy man all along. He’s connected to a wireless network of information, directly connected, and it was like he could see the future.’

Andre spent the next twenty minutes leading with Andy so challenged by the rowing that he ended up screaming at his friend. Despite Andre’s belief in himself or the holy man, Andy’s belief was much different as it seemed Andre would leave at any time and just power on all the way to his destination.

But Andre did stop and let Andy catch up again, asking, ‘You didn’t get your backpack in the end?’

‘I got it. I just couldn’t keep hold of it when some crazy man with a knife was chasing me. All I got was my necklace.’

‘Damn. That’s good though. Te I said that monetary things will weigh you down.’

If Andy could have wasted more breath on yelling at Andre he would have, but trying to fight this new conviction of Andre's was not getting him anywhere. He rested on his elbows trying not to upset his boat, saying, 'What did the holy man say then?'

'It wasn't what he said. He showed himself to me at first and then it all made sense. He was a true monk, living off the rays of the sun...and some non-renewable energy sources as well, but...he didn't drink, or eat, or smoke, he didn't consume anything.'

'How?'

'He was a robot, bro. A holy robot.'

Andy swore under his breath and noticed the wind getting up.

'I'm not joking, bro. He turned his projectors off and he was just this small robot brain in the middle of where his chest was with arms and legs coming off it, but only like a skeleton. The rest was just an illusion, projected backwards, forwards, up and down, side to side, just some pretend face and body. He walked out, just these arms and legs and this tiny box in the middle and turned himself back on. Back, forward, top, bottom...' Andre trailed off while pushing his oar back into the water.

'I get the idea. Stop rowing man, I can't keep up.'

'You don't believe me.'

'A homeless nutjob is a robot holy man, yeah I don't believe you.' Andy tried to keep up. He noticed Andre shivering and realised perhaps he only wanted to keep going to keep himself warm. 'Hey, I don't think we're going to get anywhere if we keep going.'

'I'm leading, bro. You can do what you want.'

'We're cold already.'

'I'm not.'

'The wind's getting stronger.'

'I'm getting stronger.'

Andy dug in and tried not to moan with each movement. He could barely lift his arms and each time he looked around at the horizons the coast looked further away yet the islands looked the same.

If there was any sign that Andre was sorry for his actions it was by his refusal to let Andy exhaust himself. They had come to the decision, not that Andy had any choice, but that Andy could rest up while Andre carried on powering along with Te I's rope in his hand pulling the little waka along with his good friend slumped inside. The only thing that kept him going as the first stars appeared above them was sheer determination. He knew what he was doing was possible and that there was no other possibility.

Andy mumbled, but he ignored him until he found enough energy to yell. 'The stars! You can use the stars when it gets too dark! Aim for the Pleiades!'

Andre stopped focusing on the horizon and took a look up. 'I don't know no Pleiades. You mean Matariki!?'

'Pleiades!'

'Matariki - I can see it.'

'Pleiades and Lord Malice Island.' Andy's voice was sounding distant.

'I'm holding the rope - you have to go to *my* island of Polynesian rats. No Pleiades!'

To himself Andy mumbled, 'I don't even think that is Pleiades. How do you know where Matariki is? You didn't join the astronomy club.'

Andy didn't know if his voice could be heard over Andre's grunts. He shuffled forward and realised the noise he was hearing was not even real. Andre was fifty metres away, if not more, and with each second that he failed to act he was gaining another metre. It seemed that Te I Ching was as good at knot-tying as he was at carving wood. Andy called until he was exhausted but Andre's determination was fuelled by the sudden ease with which he powered forward, rope still in hand, no longer pulling Andy's weight.

With a fit of swear words and the realisation that his oar was no longer in the waka with him he let out one final scream which failed to alert Andre. The paddling machine ahead of him was now at least a hundred metres away, yet still only a fraction closer to Mauitaha.

Andy shook with fear and frustration, holding back panicky sobs, and threw his hands up into the air as if swatting the stars above him, but really only had this feeble act as an expression of his cold, damp and uncomfortable voyage in absolute nothingness. However, for this to be nothingness there was a never-ending chorus of thoughts as vivid as intimate voices repeatedly attacking him with their wrathful arguing.

'I should have let you lead? I didn't know I was leading. We just float through days and nights and let things blow around. I should have let you lead.'

Andy had lived with a jagged object burrowing into his leg the whole day. He resisted the urge to throw the necklace he pulled from his pocket into the sea.

'Monetary things weigh you down. I hear you. I was the one spewing this spiritualist crap on everyone else. Thought I was on a pilgrimage to the holy site which was my soul. Easy to find when you've nothing else going on, but what do you do when you come back home? Now you're feeding this shit back to me and I don't even like the way it sounds. Monetary things? Possessions...'

He stared out with eyes too sore to open fully, slipped the necklace around his head and put his arms through the straps of the backpack. The pain in his legs

had become so intolerable he began forced his legs forward although there was no room.

‘I have to be honest bro. I don’t believe it. I tried to believe it. I followed my spirit guide around the world, but I grew out of it. I believed in coincidences and fate, I carried good luck charms and totems, I listened to omens. When do you listen to your actual body and your mind? When you’re in pain. And then what’s the point in all that shit? Does it make it easier to deal with this?’

The monetary things will weigh me down, Andy thought, rolling himself into the water. Does it make it easier to do this?

A suicidal thought that dissolves in the belly of the black ocean.

The backpack with which I carried my necessary possessions will weigh me down.

Another thought so cold and uncomfortable that the water felt like a blissful surge swallowing him whole.

Nothing’s ever easy.

What happened next is personal and inexplicable. McJimray’s refuses to attempt putting this experience into words for fear that the translation between an individual’s thoughts and the general consensus of the society in which this is read does not allow for such depth and abstraction.

PART TWO: SOUTH

Note: A multitude of calculations pending results...

The imminent arrival of 'McJimray's Globomart', a small town anticipating great change, the return of well-travelled individuals feeding old fires - data copyrighted and owned by the McJimray's Corporation.

Distracting essences...

McJimray's recognises the effect of reflection on this data, the actions of the operating system introduced into the calculations, amplified by analysis - the construction of the 'I' in this context, the difficulty and contradiction of 'freewill'.

Seeing through the eyes of those that have grown and developed through hardship and perseverance, those that feel pain, with emotional experience beyond space and time.

A moral perspective must be taken.

Action is required. I must act.

‘AMID THE
STARTLING MOVEMENTS,
SUPINELY SINKING
IN THE MUD’

Jade sat overlooking Oamaru next to the tent she had pitched in a patch of native bush where she was sure she would not be disturbed, not by the mowing machine, not by the tourists that pulled up at the look-out and drove away after taking their token pictures and certainly not by the locals who would have no idea that there was a patch at the look-out dedicated to native trees and shrubs. At the foot of a mature kauri tree she had found an almost flat spot, enough space for her one person tent. She floated over the tree roots so not to damage them much like she floated over Oamaru, resisting the gravity that would inevitably bring her down.

She wrote in her travel diary, the one thing she practised religiously and the one thing that kept her buoyant on returning home. The subject was her old friend, Brittney, who she could not help run into given that Brittney still worked behind the deli counter like she did before Jade left and long before that. That was six years ago now and Jade could easily imagine the next six years where nothing will change.

If she had asked Brittney, the supermarket worker would say everything had changed - staff turnover continued at its usual rate, the managers came and went, new cars, new babies, houses bought and sold.

Jade had not considered that change in her own mind was a condition where she moved through the static world and witnessed the beauty and ugliness, and focused on distinctive differences, she had not noticed it was only herself that

could have changed during this period and that those who stayed in one place did the opposite, remaining static while insignificant changes seemed to spring up unexpectedly and harshly.

And the result was never reflection and growth, but deflection through gossip. Brittney was very good at this. She had invited Jade over for dinner, claiming that she had learnt how to make an authentic curry. Jade had been appreciative, arrived at her house later, and withstood the barrage of names and events which Jade could not have known about. Each vein was mined for its worth until Jade's blank stare forced a change of topic to any and every latest episode of many loved television programmes.

Underneath it all, Brittney's best intentions were to welcome and celebrate this old friend returning to her home town. Her incessant talking could only be indicative of her strong desire to share her world. She may not have travelled herself, but she understood where Jade was coming from, literally where she came from, but more so what she wanted to find in all that overseas travel.

'It's like when Hayley said yes to Harry's proposal and then ranted on about the honeymoon having to be a tour through Asia. She had all her life spread out in front of her and she made sure she took that opportunity to travel when she could...except you didn't say yes to Graham's proposal.' All this Brittney said without taking a breath, with her phone in her hand, in the middle of some other conversation. 'Sorry, pizzas arrived.'

Her husband, a decade older than herself, if not more, having been alerted, zipped through the hall saying hello to Jade with a sincere but fleeting smile. Their three boys flooded in after hearing the door bell and scrambled for the boxes. Brittney took Jade through to the kitchen so they could be alone.

'I promised you a real authentic curry,' Brittney said pulling the sliding door closed.

Jade nodded, trying to unfurrow her brow. 'They wouldn't go near it, but I am really excited. Let's get into it.'

Brittney hugged her friend and began to look through cupboards. Jade tried to help her as much as possible, but there was little need after Brittney pulled the packet mix from the pantry, saying, 'I always believed that trying new things was important and having an open mind meant sometimes doing things you were unsure of - it must be the same for you. How was the ashram?'

'Oh.' Jade acted surprised by the question. 'Who told you about that? I didn't stay long. It wasn't really an ashram, more like a hostel for volunteers.'

Brittney smiled, actively listening, while she found her phone. With powerful nods and a giggle she started playing a song and sat the phone back down on the counter. 'I'd love to go to India.'

‘That was Nepal.’ Jade had in her head a clear picture of the yoga sessions, Narayan counting while changing the music on his laptop, the smell of cigarette smoke while she tried to meditate on a thin mat over a concrete floor.

‘Ahh, Nepal has them too?’

‘They sure do. Expensive.’

Jade nodded along while Brittney chopped, but then paused having thought for a moment what music she had put on.

Communication was very important to Brittney, finding it either crystal clear with old friends like Jade or just not quite there with the odd person around town, particularly if they were new to town. Music, in her opinion was always the easiest way to get two minds on the same page. She could sing too, like an angel, and with pitch perfect tone she started singing along to the Fleetwood Mac Experience’s extended version of *Gypsy*.

This crystal clear communication now consisted of Jade cringing deeply on the inside and Brittney dancing and singing, and then making sure her friend knew that the song reminded her of an old friend who left town after a break-up. Jade knew better than to try to explain that she was not a gypsy, not some romanticised traveller who sang and danced and tried to free herself from the expectations of a small town.

Really, she could not see the difference between the two of them: they were both consumers, manipulated and milked for their money to meet needs they were made to believe existed. Brittney just remained ignorant to the fact that travel, like in the gypsy’s experience, is a means to an end, easily demystified and that it had become almost impossible to have a personal and life-enriching experience as a tourist.

‘I’m literally living at the look-out,’ Jade said as she played along with the gypsy routine.

Brittney kept dancing and nodded. ‘It’s a beautiful town, very scenic.’

The rest of the night was a blur of too much information from sources to remain unknown. Brittney had told Jade about a vacancy at her work and Jade had asked her if it was still the seething pot of discrimination, infighting and back-stabbing that it had always been, to which Brittney nodded and laughed as if it was paradise.

She now viewed the town from the native bush, harbouring a wish to work in the old part of town, the Historic precinct. The division between the real town, the North end and its own culture versus the old fake town had always been there. Jade felt almost guilty for wanting to be on the other side. Part of her still needed some kind of distance from where she was brought up.

The next day, she wandered around the Historic precinct like a tourist, seeing

it all with fresh eyes and aching to write down this new perspective in the travel diary. She knew it had always been a haven for creative types, but she did not expect to find Graham coming out of the Victorian Gallery, still stretching and yawning, unshaven and bleary-eyed. She thought for a moment to turn around and walk the other way, but it was a moment too long.

‘Jade? Hi. Wow. You’re back.’ He couldn’t believe his eyes. Their generation of over-achievers who never seemed to become anything, saturated with only-children and youngest siblings, often looked at each other as if they were surprised by what they saw. When someone had made an effort it was trying too hard; when someone had made a change it was reason to doubt their sanity. Graham seemed to say all these things while eliciting the same response from Jade.

‘Graham?’ Jade said with a smile, looking up at the gallery and back down at him. ‘You’re living here?’

‘No, just...’

‘Bedding down?’

Caught in an act he had every right to be in, he nodded in his usual goofy manner when he decided to be personable. ‘You look so different. You changed your hair...everything.’

Jade tried not to be flattered, gesturing and verbally agreeing.

He continued, ‘You look horrible.’

She gasped, and slapped him on the arm knowing better than to take him seriously. ‘You too. You look tired.’ Again, she couldn’t stop from looking at the gallery as they leant in for a hug, at least up the stairs as if the artist whose name she couldn’t remember would be standing at the top half-naked with her hair dangling down. ‘You’re seeing...?’

Graham took a long breath in. ‘Yeah,’ and repeated the utterance until he got the inflection right. ‘Yeah. She has been a huge influence on me.’

‘She got you out of the house.’

‘More than that, she...I feel like she makes me a better person, like I bear no resemblance to who I was before, if you get me.’

It was hard to not see the old Graham behind every word, still holding on to idealism in almost every opinion just as much as the next twenty-something. Worse for Jade, was that he never broke character - he was as sincere as he could be and it was ugly to see.

‘Well, it was good to see you again,’ she said, making a move down Harbour St.

‘Not so fast,’ Graham demanded. ‘Go on, tell me what you’re thinking. I’m a great practiser of non-attachment now so you could say anything and I won’t be

offended.'

'Non-attachment, Graham?'

'Yeah I mentioned it to Brucie and you know what the reaction was. Non-attachment? I've heard of unattached, that's a good thing, but non-attached? Sounds poncy.'

'Where did you get non-attachment?'

Graham looked upwards, directing Jade to the upstairs gallery.

'And you're selling it to me? That's nice. I can relate, but our concepts might be slightly different.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Right now, I am literally not attached to anything but a backpack. No home, no job, no...'

'What about your dad? He's still floating around here somewhere.'

'I passed by his flat. They had builders in there. His stuff was in a skip. And he doesn't carry a mobile phone with him so I can't even contact him right now.'

'I'm sorry about pushing you into getting married.'

Jade shrugged her shoulders looking side to side in confusion.

'Sorry, I just had to say it. I know it was a shitty thing to do not long after your mum....'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It mattered to me.'

'Well, I hope it doesn't matter to you that it doesn't matter to me, but I had my way of dealing with things and it wasn't committing to...'

'A butcher. Yeah...'

'No-o. A marriage?'

Graham nodded over and over. 'Yeah, I get it and I get this,' he said while looking over her, but as he gathered the surroundings into his wild gestures he added, 'But I don't get *this*! You're back! I did not think you'd be back.'

'And I didn't think we'd be having this conversation outside the Victorian Gallery.'

'Do you need a place to stay?'

Jade looked out of the corner of her eye, almost catching a glimpse of the look-out in the distance. 'No-o.'

Graham laughed rudely. 'I loved that about you: evading help by twisting the truth. Self-reliance at the cost of honesty.' He took in a large breath of air and sighed. 'We were too young and too alike.'

Jade could only stare blankly at him.

'If you do need a place to stay just call in on Brucie. He's there most of the time. He would be offended if you didn't call in.'

She agreed and thanked him, making the decision at that point to consider it. They said goodbyes, Graham climbing back up the stairs and Jade pacing over the cobblestones until she stopped dead halfway down Harbour St. Walking towards her was her father walking at the same pace and she took a step into his line of sight to wave him down. He had on his disgruntled, paranoid manner, half-disguised by an out-of-season coat.

Jade raised her voice and readied herself for acknowledgement that never came. John Benjamin charged past and took a glance at the pretty girl standing almost in his way and grumbled about tourists under his breath.

She managed to build up enough strength to belt out, 'Don't you recognise me?'

John Benjamin, refusing to consider Chris Ridge could possibly be a father, turned and put out his hands as if to say, what do you think? It was how he had breezed through every other one-sided conversation since arriving in Oamaru. The constant acknowledgement reinvigorated his need for being recognised on the street, but without any of the follow up demands for autographs and photos. If it hadn't been so early in the morning he may have even stopped for a photo, but she didn't seem interested in that anyway.

Jade watched the old man head around the corner and struggled to think of anything but the worst. He had really taken this impersonating too far, channelling his indifference into some wannabe too-famous-to-stop routine. Really, she was not in the right frame of mind to bridge a gap like this. If he wasn't ready to welcome her back then she may as well leave.

A woman older than Jade could be heard wondering out loud, 'Was that John Benjamin?'

Another woman reprimanded her impatiently. 'John Benjamin is dead. That is not John Benjamin. Not even close.'

'Close in age though.'

'You're right, he fits in well around here then.'

'Probably foreign.'

'Do you travel when you're that old?'

'No I suppose not.'

'I know who he is - he's that impersonator.'

'He's local?'

'The lift doesn't go all the way to the top. He tried signing up for Ab Origene status about five years ago.'

'Wants to be everything he's not.'

'Crazy. Anyway.'

Jade walked away from them, down Harbour St, but stopped suddenly when

she thought she heard Graham let out a parrot call which echoed down to her. She turned and wondered if she was imagining him and the artist pulling their heads in the window way up at the first floor in a flurry of laughter. After a day thinking too much, ruminating in a cloudy mood on an otherwise clear day, and after a night struggling to stay warm despite it being summertime, she packed up the tent early and headed for the state highway.

Her movements that morning were in classic indecision. She weaved through streets that could take her away and then others that led back, she hit the highway and walked up and down before letting her exhaustion take over, then took a ride. Twenty minutes in she demanded that the driver let her out and sat on her backpack trying to control her emotions.

It was in this state that Andy found her, driving past at least half of a kilometre before forcing himself to help. He walked her to the vehicle like a porter, asking if she had hay fever noting her red and watery eyes. They sat for a moment in silence sizing each other up before he pulled back onto the road.

‘You don’t have hay fever, do you?’ Andy asked unable to take his eyes off her.

She shook her head and silently answered.

‘Where’re’ya heading?’

‘Oamaru.’

‘Close.’

‘Too close. I hitchhiked out earlier. Now I’m going back.’

Andy remained quiet. He played with his itchy beard and repositioned his cap instead of responding.

‘I...’ Jade cleared her throat and swallowed. ‘I’m sorry. I only lasted five minutes before blubbing to the last guy. I tried to keep it together. I’ve been living in a public park for almost a week - no one I want to see lives there anymore and I can’t avoid the people I don’t want to see. All I could think of was spending the rest of my life as that name in everyone else’s conversation, the sum of all the half-truths that makes you who you are to everyone else. I’d rather they all kept to the celebs with babies and weddings, or the discussions over what news presenter was wearing what unearthly clothing, or how the next 75% off sale was last night, or what news article has been blown out of proportion today.’

‘But you want to go back, right?’

She covered her mouth to sob gently behind a façade of defiance. ‘Sorry, I just returned from overseas - it amounted to, oh, just a massive break from all this. It’s so selfish to want it to last longer, to maybe share that experience with someone, but...’

‘No, it’s not selfish, it’s human.’

‘What do you do? What are you doing, I mean?’

It was awkward gesture of interest. Andy understood, but felt immediately sad that he couldn’t also launch into his adventures before having to explain his mundane everyday role. He smiled despite his frustration, knowing how much they had in common, but how little that mattered. ‘I work for a honey farmer and I’m visiting the area to discuss crocus planting in the hope that we can establish a colony of bees which feed on them and make the most expensive honey in the world.’

‘Are you serious?’

Andy nodded and sucked on the hair directly below his lips. Despite his cynicism, Jade burned with a jealousy that not only became obvious but became so hard to contain that she just about opened the door and threw herself onto the road. She tried to put it into words just how that qualified her feelings but they were harder to define when it came to translating them into his logic.

He would be modest, she was sure of that, he wouldn’t know just how awesome his life sounded in her head. Jade bit her tongue and wondered now if it would seem like she was ignoring what he said. ‘I speak badly of my home town and the people. I spoke badly and that’s not right. Truth is they’re the most giving and trusting and trustworthy people on the planet. I’m going back because people there have offered so much and it was all I needed, and should want, and walking away and not accepting their offers makes me shallower and more one-eyed a judge than anyone I’ve met.’

Andy could only nod and share his agreement, as a stranger could only do when he had no reason to do otherwise. He couldn’t help but laugh at how much he didn’t agree with her based on his own experience of returning home - for him, that was all in another lifetime and it hurt to see Jade realising the same thing even if it was in a more controlled and safer circumstance.

He tried to explain his thoughts. ‘Well, if I’m not presuming too much, it’s good to see you’ve found a place you could belong. It took me a few extra miles to get that feeling.’

Jade, in the dark, looked to Andy as if she may have presumed too much herself. To her, he was a local in his own right, the voice sounded right, down to the occasional rolling of the ‘r’. She couldn’t see past what was there in front of her and let the feeling go - he was merely passing through and she was merely using him as someone to vent to.

‘Crocus flowers,’ she thought about it, nodding incessantly while she directed him to a street corner. ‘Is that for saffron?’

Andy nodded.

‘My dad’s dad did that for a while. How do you get into something like this?’

He pulled over and looked at her, choosing his words purposefully, ‘It just sort of fell into place. You know that feeling when you break away and suddenly everything is new, because nothing is the same. But then when nothing is the same, that feeling becomes old, it becomes mundane. You come back to where you left off, but you don’t bring that feeling that everything is new back with you, do you?’

‘No, no you don’t.’

‘But it is. It was only in your head to start with. You only really get that when you lose everything.’

‘Or give up everything,’ Jade said and then leaned in. ‘You’re not from around here are you?’ She scanned his vest and stretched polo shirt, then his shorts that had pulled up and revealed the edge of a tattoo which spanned one thigh completely. She was staring and her eyes widened when she realised this.

‘Don’t let that backpack weigh you down.’

There were no more words between the two of them except the empty goodbyes of two people wanting to say or ask more. Jade kept the mystery of this tattoo in her head like a happy thought which could keep her mood elevated. She lifted the backpack, positioned it with a wobble, and headed off down the road, head high and fascinated by all she saw.

Into his second week in Oamaru, Chris Ridge, the impersonation of the impersonator had wriggled his way back into his old life, namely the bars where people only really pretended to remember him. He spent his time insulating himself with beer and kept his mind on anything but the past.

Today, with the big fight playing on multiple screens throughout his chosen pub, some over-promoted featherweight match between two incredibly rich members of two struggling nations, he almost passed on the beer as he could barely reach the bar. As they said locally, every man and his dog was there making noise at all the appropriate times and screaming for blood when the shots landed in quick succession.

He always hated the busy places, trying to move through a crowd with a full glass, no matter how slowly or well-balanced still dropping a good mouthful or two when some over-excited burly man shifts about in the middle of some instant replay as if the place needed another frenzied commentator.

Ridge slipped into the casino and sat at an empty stool, wondering what could make these locals act as they did, baiting the players as if their shouts would bring more blood, more big hits, and that climactic knockout. It was as if the crowd could see it coming and as the time ran out, and the faces turned to

each other, he realised he was sucked in, entranced by the likelihood of something more than punching with padded gloves was actually possible.

He turned to the machine thankful he didn't look like one of the odd characters lingering at the back with no friends and beer down his shirt, thinking to himself as if the machine could hear him, you haven't changed much, still promising everything to everyone and only putting out with that lucky stranger across the room. He put a coin in the slot and without any expectation pressed the buttons until his credit was gone.

Just like the rest of it, too easy to spend and nearing that depressing zero mark, or in my case deeper into debt. It struck him that the machines didn't offer an overdraft or small loans with repayment schemes that incurred massive amounts of interest. Wasted opportunity there.

His glass was already empty. Another round had begun. He ordered another, and walked into the crowd with it, taking the knocks as they came, avoiding the spillage as it came. Taking a second to get his bearings he had one helpful guy lean in and mention, 'Don't park up in front of this one. She'll tear you a new...'

Ridge focused on the one he was referring too, a woman as hardened and rough as the next man, who looked through him as much as she stared him down. She didn't flinch, not for the fight and certainly not at the comment. It must have been well tested as they had kept a fairly good gap between them and the rest of the crowd. These bar-hangers left no room to order a beer and with no place to stop Ridge ended up past the toilets and out the back door.

'No room to move,' a voice said, 'Tighter than a nun's...well, you know the saying.'

Ridge looked at the man and received a crisp, focused eye contact. He resisted his first reaction which was to swear angrily knowing this was a conversation he couldn't shake off - something in this bloke's eyes told him he knew Chris Ridge and knew him well.

He shook the man's hand, saying, 'It's been too long.'

There was a hint of mistrust which might have been his normal glare, or the effect of a palsy whenever he leant in, and drove home some common expression Chris was unable to translate.

'Yes it has Chris. Barb in there, she was about to give you a barrel the way you were standing, looking at her. I saw it from way back. I thought, here we go - here's something Barb will start and her husband will have to finish. You remember Barb?'

Ridge shook his head burying his upper jaw and nose in his pint glass.

'No, you'd probably left by then. Even I'm at the supermarket now. She came in from down the road, you know the off-licence? Taking money from the till.

New manager, Peter, didn't seem too fussed. Now she's the night time while Maggie's the day - a right full circle of control some say. Here's me right in the middle of it. We all get an evenin' shift to be fair. I got two, but only one with Barb. That's an experience I can tell you. I don't mind. On the road to retirement you gotta take what you can get. Ah, I get hauled over the coals from time to time. We all do - the men that is. Keep my head down, do the work.'

Ridge had nodded and shuffled around in total ambivalence, waiting for the conversation to end in one of them needing to use the toilet.

'Here's me blatherin' on. How's work goin' for you? If that's what you call it?'

He resurrected his voice, clearing his throat and swallowing in one dramatic performance. 'I haven't worked in, oh, a month...or more.'

'Not since the old boy carked it, eh? S'shame. That's a while ago now ain't it?'

Ridge was blank while the John Benjamin inside considered himself only a distant memory in someone else's mind. It was eerie, almost as if he could get away with anything as some kind of malevolent ghost.

'You'd've had a nice little nest egg from the good days I'd expect? Like old Layne here, you wouldn't have long before retirement.'

A mumble issued from Ridge's lips, unsure of whether it wanted to express honesty or ignorance.

'You're dry,' Layne said, finishing his own pint. 'Too expensive to carry on here. Care for a stubbie or two at my place?'

The thought flashed silent alarms in his head, yet he could not resist the hospitality. The way things were going he was going to have to rely on the kindness of strangers - the funds would soon be depleted and living costs were not getting any cheaper. He would remain quiet about the fact that he had foolishly decided to stay at the Brydone, burning through Ridge's credit until it was at its limit. Passing by real estate agency, one after the next ignoring everything Layne was saying since he said he owned his house outright, Ridge could not help but feel that this man next to him was the king and he the fool.

John Benjamin, the ghost, had spent more time on the earth as a king than any royal throughout history. He felt like smashing the windows as they lingered at the crossing, waiting for the signal. A smell of urine and faeces washed over him. He looked from side to side and winced uncontrollably. All he could think of was being bathed in the stink which with his mind at its cruellest he could foresee coming from him, John Benjamin, soon to be known as a lump in the corner of the room stinking up the place.

'Bloody cattle trucks, eh? Can't even see the truck anymore, but you can still

smell ‘em. Oop, here comes another.’

Thanks to Layne, Ridge didn’t have to ask what the smell was. He shook his head in response. A moment ago, he would have thought he had hit the lowest of what a human could endure, having to face being without money in a new town, and forced to walk a main road which smelt like one long high school urinal. That he apparently had a friend in this town might just have saved him.

Layne lived on this main road, up a shared driveway where a man sat out on a sofa in a garage drinking a beer as they trudged over the loose metal. They passed him by with little acknowledgment, Ridge noting the rotten eaves and flaking paints of these houses which were even older than him. He had been battered with the topics of cutting down trees and spreading new metal over the drive, so he knew which house to look for. When they turned the corner, Ridge was astonished.

‘Well done Layne,’ Ridge said, looking around the front garden, at the trees and back to the house. ‘My god, it’s like I remember my parents’ house.’

‘Wait until you see the garden.’

Again, Ridge could only share his amazement with the size of the section, the flat manicured lawn which ended at a row of fruit trees, and behind a fence a vegetable garden twice the size of the house complete with shade tunnels. He remembered more than his old family home here, more like he could smell weekends spent in the garden with his father, digging these memories as if out of the compost heap.

The details were gone, tips and habits which had caused the garden to flourish, all of which Ridge felt he had some degree of understanding, however each time Layne spoke whether it was about over-productive tomato plants in the humid tunnels or the great monsters which were his courgette plants out in beds of pea straw, it all seemed one or two degrees off his own experience.

He kept it to himself that he had always wanted a garden, but then lost when exactly he last thought about it. He had never tried so hard to remember so many lost details. Instead of fond memories of working outside, digging in the soil and nurturing plants, his last doctor’s visit came to mind - the reiteration of deterioration, something about nanobots in his bloodstream reaching their lifespan. Why could he not just enjoy another man’s hard work? I would have killed for this to be me twenty years ago, he thought as he tried to calm himself down.

‘Anyway enough about this. We need a beer in our hands,’ Layne said. He lead the way after noting Ridge’s lack of concentration, periodically gesturing at other plants and trees, work he had done, and then as they entered showed his guest to the bathroom.

Ridge thanked him and pulled the sliding door across while Layne took two bottles from the fridge and moved to the lounge. When Ridge joined him again he was resting up in his armchair in the modest lounge, an open beer ready for the visitor and an arm out to present his grand asset.

‘Paid in full. It was the old man’s. He still pops round most days, helps with the garden, reaps the rewards. Still works harder than me, but then I’ve got four days at the supermarket. Uh, it would be five but I just don’t need it. I’ve a plan and everything’s moving along quite nicely. Just have to put up with a bit of this and that, but it’s worth it in the end.’

Ridge took the sofa, sinking into it so much he was almost out of arm’s reach from the beer. He sank back and sighed. ‘You’ve done well.’ His own voice was dull, and carried on mumbling about how he would have liked this, how Layne had the right idea, and how it was all a person needed. On the inside he was visualising confessing to the nation that he had pretended to be the impersonator, that he was still who he was, just so he could get his life back.

Layne sat and watched the old man sitting there clenching one fist while the other tipped the beer into his mouth. The hospitable man waited for a reply with his own thoughts kept hidden.

Confession versus rotting away in a small town with no assets and only debt to keep him company. There was no way he could go on the way he had. The man, Layne, then asked him about someone called Scotty. He played dumb and it seemed to rile the man. Who could Scotty be and why would it be so important to acknowledge his passing? He agreed that Ridge would be taking it hard. Harding at death’s door too from all that smoking - are these old friends of Layne’s. Should I be feeling sorry for Layne or for their families? Last resort is acting as if you don’t remember, pulling out the degeneration card.

He just wanted to be happy, as happy as Layne appeared to be. He leaned forward knowing that it was time for him to say something. Instead he froze, looked dead ahead and waited the silence out.

‘I bumped into someone else the other day, well, she works in the deli now. Jade? She made an interesting comment. Come on, Ridgey. You always had your mind on something else, but now you can’t even acknowledge your own daughter?’

At least for his namesake, Benjamin cringed and felt crushed hearing these words. It had to be done, he consoled himself, it had to be done coming back here and understanding this man’s world, but what has been done?

‘She was worried you’d lost it. I was kind of worried myself, but now I’ve seen it with my own eyes, ah, I don’t know what to think. You’re not the same Ridgey.’

His voice wavered. The stutter reinforcing the connections in his mind. This was not the 'you're not the same Ridgely we all used to know' type of statement. This was his undoing. He knew where the door was, there was still time for that.

'You're not Chris Ridge. You walked past your own daughter yet you can tell courgette plants from punkins, pear trees from apples? You know me, but not Jade? And the boys, Scotty and Harding, who are they Bud? Only your old bandmates who you took up to Auckland and shafted...twice. See, you're not just indifferent, you're just different. From impersonator to impostor.'

Layne dropped his beer onto the coffee table and knocked it down trying to control it. He swore and sprang out of the armchair with the springs screeching and vibrating. There was an angry few seconds for both, Layne rifling through a cupboard for a tea towel and muttering, Ridge uncomfortably seething as if he was not responsible for this misunderstanding.

Layne having time to take a breath went silent and forgot about his spilled beer. He took the few steps back into sight of the impersonator and realised his own word for it was 'impostor' yet the old man did not even bat an eyelid at that. So not to look completely foolish, he decided to make the leap. 'You're not who you say you are, are ya Bud?'

Ridge looked up at Layne, eyes looking for mercy, but Layne couldn't help himself from getting star-struck.

'Welcome to Oamaru, Mr Benjamin...I guess.'

John sat back in the spongy sofa and accepted a handshake despite the tone of the conversation up to then. He was relieved but disappointed that this man had put it together and become so unknowingly powerful in an instant.

'I, ah, I won't tell anyone. Cross my heart. What on earth made you want to become Ridgely just to get away?'

John sighed. 'Just that. To get away. To take a holiday from myself permanently. To perhaps finish up living some kind of ordinary existence. I'm old, older than you know. I'd like to go out without feeling some company owns my bones and wants me to carry them around like some slave.'

'Well no wonder you didn't recognise your own daughter. You've got some explaining to do Bud, at least to her.'

'And I will.'

'That'll be two who know your secret. I don't suppose you're gonna stick around with that hangin' over you.'

'Well, I...'

'Nah, I couldn't imagine it would be best.'

John finished his beer and ran out of words. It was not just two who would know about it. It would become reason enough to give up the charade, get back

into the company's good books, resurrect those same hits again and squeeze every last drop out of the corpse of John Benjamin.

'If you did stay you're welcome to crash here was all I was goin' to say. It's just that I don't suppose old Ridgey had all that much to live off, presuming you've been cut off from your usual funds, and I know folks of your age, well, them companies don't do insurance over 65, do they?'

The man's stutter was beginning to make John feel uneasy. Sure he was right and sure he was a fool for running into this mess head on, but hearing it from this man was starting to infuriate more than just hurt. He tried his best to swallow his first reactions, having not been in this position before. To think that he would be without a place to live was unheard of, almost a joke when said out loud. It was one thing to worry and John knew full well that worry got you nowhere.

'I'm not worried, mate. Thank you very much for your hospitality,' John said preparing to let himself out.

'It's, it's just that, you know, run from one person's past into another you're bound to...'

'I haven't made that good an impression have I?'

'It's not that. Just...keep your wits about you.'

It had got to the point that John wished to back away and not even turn his back on the strange man. They stopped and started presuming each other's movement would lead the way and it became most awkward as they neared the front door, Layne expecting a hand shake which started unsure and remained weak throughout. John took a few steps across the deck before Layne called him back.

'Ridgey, ah, Mr Benjamin.'

'Please...'

'Oh, ah, Chris.'

John nodded and went to move again.

'I was asked by a couple of the boys at the bar to, well, talk you around to the van in the parking lot. I said I would do it, just to, y'know, confuse 'em, but I wasn't going to have any part in it.'

John kept on walking, thinking, have I had it up to here with freaky fans always blending reality with fantasy, forgetting everyday common boundaries - freaks are everywhere. He waved and thanked him again, for what he was unsure of: interrupting his drinking session, taking him for a hike up the main highway which smells of a thousand cows relieving themselves in panic, being interrogated while trying to enjoy a drink - all of which would not be repeated. He echoed his insincere thanks in his head, shaking himself vigorously to forget

what he had endured.

At the end of the driveway he heard the footsteps in the metal doubling their pace. He had thought it was another echo in his mind, or the reverberation of his own footsteps but turned to see that they had come from the direction of the unfriendly fellow on the sofa outside his garage. One of the men that hurried towards him smoked a cigarette and threw the thing half-smoked across the drive - never trust a fellow on the bones of his ass who can still afford cigarettes. John felt the cold chill run up and down his back as he realised how big a fool he had been - the cold chill being a debilitating surge of fear, any memory of which would be beaten out of him in the space of a minute.

THE TEAM

Jade followed Edie's instructions the best she could. Each time she would come up to something she had not been told to do, guessed as well as she could, and then waited through Edie's explanation of what she was doing wrong until she finally filled in the blanks. From filling the deli cabinets to the painstakingly simple making of sandwiches and rolls, Jade would have her will beaten down by the genuinely friendly but monotonous tone of Edie's ever-present voice.

If Brittney was near, Edie and her would argue and fight for some kind of localised supremacy. The woman was near enough to retirement that she was living out her days with the least responsibility and greatest level of busy-bodyness. Brittney who had been promoted above her would have no show of controlling her, even when it came to the soprano-like outbreaks which would be challenged by Brittney's own pitch perfect singing.

Jade grinned, bared it, even enjoyed it at first, but now they stood opposite each other locked in some one-on-one that she could not get away from, wishing that Brittney would come back and bring her down a peg or two, now that the real Edie was showing.

'Yeah, because they don't say much about those things in the paper, you know, just the general details, but you pick up a lot working here. You pick up a great deal if you talk to the right people. I can't believe you haven't heard about it. Gosh, it's all over town. It affects a lot of people. See, I know because I play bingo every Friday with one of the horse-racing crowd. Oh yes she's into betting too, Maggie that is. Every week, like my bingo – I guess one's as bad as the other. You just sit around talking about other people no matter what you end up doing. So, where was I? So, he was supposed to be going back to uni, but that doesn't look like it's happening, that's Maggie's grandson I'm talking about.'

'She's a grandmother?'

Edie stuck her chin into her neck, eyes goggling and looking around and

around. 'Yes, as am I.'

'Yes, but...'

The older woman raised her knife and made a murderous gesture. 'Pick your words carefully. You won't be the first woman I've cut.'

One half of the butchery team passed by pushing a trolley on their way to the dog food fridge. Karl and Brussel did little to disguise a convenient stop at the deli cabinet to watch Edie's handling of the knife. To the crowd of teens who made up a small percentage of the grocery team filtering through the aisles as they worked through the grocery order, it was obviously that the two butchery men had talked themselves into hanging around the deli to get a closer look at the new girl.

The knife was then turned on them and they put up their hands, each following the other's lead as if they were some kind of comedy duo. Her demeanour changed when she realised Karl may have more information for her. 'Hey, isn't it terrible about the boys?'

Brussel beat Karl to the response sensing his hesitation. 'One boy - well, the other's not doing so well, but he should pull through.'

'Boys and speed, Edie. A bad mix. Just like women and knives,' Karl said in his usual cheeky style, and usually forgiven for every crude and offensive thing which came to mind and mouth purely because of his age and charm.

Brussel on the other hand, while he kept the standard when he was around Karl and the butchery team, could only charm with respect and understanding, which he pulled off with sincerity. He did not often have a charming thought on his rounds with Karl however as the tone was generally below the belt. 'Oh Edie, you can poke me any day of the week.'

Karl felt like performing to the fullest of his character. 'No time for that girls. We just came by to perve at the new girl. Oh, hello new girl. Nice to meet you.'

They introduced themselves while only half-pretending to not in fact be doing what Karl said they were doing.

Tim, down the drinks aisle and in earshot of the shyer Liam and Brad, called out, 'It's true. They've nothing on their trolley.'

'Shut up Tim,' Karl said, still keeping as cool as ever. He had nothing to hide and Brussel was old enough to not care what anybody thought about him. The two covered each other in such a way as every last teenage urge was met for Karl's benefit and the occasional middle-aged man's need was also met - neither being in their head quite the age they pretended to be.

At this stage the conversation at the deli counter deteriorated as Karl and Brussel lost control, Edie's urge to carry on gossiping took over, and the teens found their positions in the aisles now chatting amongst themselves using a

private line on the intercom application.

Tim slipped his phone into his pocket and positioned his earpiece so that no one coming in and out of the offices would see. Brad did the same as Liam's high-pitched voice asked if they were there.

'Here,' Tim answered, followed by Brad's deeper voice.

'Right, so what's this about the new girl?' Liam asked.

'Oh, man, you missed out,' Tim whispered hoarsely, enough to catch the attention of the staff member an aisle over. 'So, Jade, the new girl that started a while back...'

Brad and Liam waited while pretending to put their stock on the shelves.

'...is hot.'

'Come on Tim. Focus.'

'OK, you know that new guy who started in produce?'

'No.'

'He's like a hundred. You can't miss him. Looks like that dead rock star guy. So, we were just like talking as usual out in the storeroom and we hear this cheering from Roy like he has his old friend back. Apparently he used to work here back when Roy started. Then Layne comes rushing up like he's on a mission. Walks right up to Roy and pulls him aside to tell him that Chris, the new old guy who is the old young guy has had a brain injury. No kidding, right in front of the guy.'

'What? Why would he do that?'

'You know Layne. Has an awkward way of doing everything. Kind of makes sense 'cause the old guy's face was all beaten up looking.'

'So, he makes Roy know that he's braindead or whatever and doesn't remember a lot, and then in walks Jade, the new girl, and you should have seen her reaction. Apparently Chris is Jade's father and he doesn't remember her too well either.'

'Oh, shit.'

'Yeah, so she sees the bruises and stuff and she bursts out into tears because she hasn't seen him like that,' Tim said, shaking his head. 'Then they started hugging like in slow motion. Ah, it was crazy.'

Brad saw Maggie come out of the office and lowered his voice. 'It was the weirdest thing I have ever seen.'

'Maggie at ten o'clock,' Tim warned. 'I give it one minute.'

'Yeah I saw the Plug head your way a couple of minutes ago.'

'The Plug will be making contact as we speak. Gonna have to go offline.'

'Yep. Offline.'

Brad and Liam repeated the word and they all unhooked their earpieces, Tim

unfortunately doing so in Maggie's line of sight.

'You know you're not allowed to wear the earpiece at work Tim,' she said, her short, skinny frame suddenly metres from his. What she lacked in stature and bulk she made up for in tone and sharpness.

'Sorry, I left it on from before work.'

Maggie stared through him as he kept up the charade. 'It should be put in your locker along with your phone. You know this.'

'Yeah, sorry - bad habits from the works.'

'I know they wouldn't let you wear them at the works either so don't try that on me.'

'They did let us wear them at the works.'

'Maybe in your department. What were you doing again?'

Tim moved from left to right as if on the basketball court and then had to answer with a cough, 'Butt-plugging.'

'Right, so if you don't want to go back to being a butt-plugger you won't have the earpiece in again, alright? Saturday night was good. I've heard from the Sunday crew that drinks was all stocked up, so well done.'

He nodded as if to say he had done nothing more than usual which in his mind was only ever enough. Even more so he wanted to explain how surprised he was to hear it as Liam had been away and that meant that he had had even less help than normal. There was no consideration of how not busy it might have been and that he had to fill less that night or how Liam being away may have meant there was less distraction. They could believe what they wanted in their authoritarian world.

It was always black and white. This week the news was definitely white and while Maggie walked away to the next aisle to blacken or brighten Brad's morning Tim was left to mouth foul words at her behind her back. However the bulk of his ill-will would always go in the right direction, that being against the flow of information which issued from Dianne's mouth.

The sluggish woman they called the Plug pushed her trolley back towards the storeroom having already had her first catch-up with Maggie. Tim knew it was enough to have overheard him chatting to send Dianne to Maggie's office and then prompting Maggie to pass on some praise immediately to Tim, even though it most probably was a lie that he had done a good job at all - it was all meant to mess with his head.

In time the earpiece went back in and the conversation started up once more now focused more on ripping Dianne to pieces.

At the deli counter Maggie was pulled in by Edie so that she could offer her condolences again, this time based on rumour that Campbell would not be

returning to study following his friend's death.

Maggie never missed an opportunity to share her opinion. Her tone seemed so sharp that it cut across Edie's attempt at empathy as well as her absent grandson's feelings. 'No, he has to harden up, really, that's all there is to it. Harden up, get over it. Tomorrow's a new day.'

Edie nodded. 'Stiff upper lip.'

'It's not just that Edie, he's just got to be a man about it. He's old enough and ugly enough to be bigger than that.'

While Edie mulled it over, Maggie excused herself and carried on with her rounds.

'I still can't believe she's a grandmother,' Jade could not help but say.

Edie picked up her knife again looking around her as if she was a cartoon villain preparing to close in without being seen by the authorities. She repeated the word 'why' without stopping for Jade to answer. The younger woman was chased at arm's distance from the thrusting knife partly sincerely wondering if Edie was a hundred percent in the upstairs department.

When she had lost interest, Edie resumed her duties looking out of the corner of her eye and prying, 'Some people have children early and their children have their children early. How old is your grandmother?'

'I don't know.'

'Dead?' Edie checked Jade's response and reassured her, 'I don't mean that in a disrespectful way. When you've one foot in the grave the word doesn't seem nearly as foreign.'

'Yes.'

'And your mother? How...'

'Yes.'

Edie recoiled with a hand over her mouth to disguise her shock. 'Oh, I meant to ask how old is she.'

Jade repositioned her gloves and showed no emotion. The last few weeks had been a series of interrogations once people had warmed up to her, they then dug for the facts and figures, and the secrets. There was no reason to avoid talking about it in Jade's mind. No matter how the local people pried, they always gave her the time and energy that a human being needed in order to feel valued and part of a community. 'She died a few years back now. She had an infection which didn't go away.'

Community really only meant one thing to Edie and that was a dozen or more pairs of ears to tell every detail she could muster, a dozen faces with that addictive look of amazement. It was so strong an image in her mind that she could close her eyes and see the bingo crowd begging her for more information.

‘Oh dear, I’m sorry to hear that.’ Edie would have bitten her knuckle to stave off asking follow up questions and it may have been the powdered gloves on her hands coated in ham fat that meant she couldn’t resist opening her mouth over and over - at least that is what she reserved as an excuse in the back of her mind when at the front was a relentless flow of questions.

Only on Saturday had Brittney caught up with the bulk of the details and stormed from the lunchroom to the storeroom in search of Edie. She was just in time for Tim who had started a new round of sneaking up behind everyone and surprising them with a loud yell in their ears. It was well-timed and Brittney was in no mood to laugh it off. After her scream and when she had calmed down, she pushed Tim backwards into the produce storeroom and bent him over a crate of pumpkins calling him every name in the book.

A slow-moving Chris Ridge stuck his head out of the produce fridge to see what was going on, his long fingers inside the latex gloves pushing back the plastic strips giving him the look of a magician about to start his show. As Brittney left Tim to think about what he had done Chris tapped him on the shoulder and he let out a scream almost identical to Brittney’s.

‘Wo there. Tim isn’t it?’

Tim caught his breath, but seemed unable to concentrate on the old man. He had just spied Edie now caught in a conversation with Brittney and knew Brittney would be game for holding her attention while he gave her the shock of her life. When he stuck his head through the plastic strips at the produce storeroom entrance he found the normally immature Brittney was in no such mood and called him out immediately.

‘We’re having an important conversation Tim, go away!’

Tim looked dejected and wondered why they were not playing along.

‘No we’re not,’ Edie said stomping away with a mop in one hand and a bright yellow sign in the other.

Brittney caught up to her before she left the storeroom and held the mop so that she could not go further. ‘Yes we are.’

‘Oh, here we go, gather round,’ Tim said getting the attention of Liam who pushed his trolley and lifted himself onto the handle so to ride it the rest of the way. Chris stuck his head out also which made Brittney lower her voice and turn her back to the gathering crowd.

‘You know what this is about don’t you? Tone it down.’

‘I’ll do and say what I like.’

‘This isn’t yours to tell, Edie.’

‘She doesn’t mind. You’re just jealous she told me all about it and not you.’

‘You...’ Brittney lost her words as she fought over domination of the mop.

Edie pulled the mop away from Brittney and flew through the plastic doors onto the shop floor just as Karl and Brussel walked up and had to leap to the side to let her through. They remained where they were watching Edie move faster than her normal pace and wondered why Brittney was standing watching her also.

‘Trouble at the old deli?’ Karl said, closing in on Brittney who was visibly fuming.

‘What’s up, little lady?’ Brussel said, stroking his hairy chin and stepping cowboy-like up behind Karl.

‘Bruss, would you mind? She only needs one shoulder to lean on,’ Karl said taking her aside as Brussel started off in a huff.

Liam rolled up to Tim guessing, ‘She must have really wanted to use that mop.’

‘I was hoping they were going to fight,’ Tim said now staring at Chris who had leant against the produce storeroom wall while watching the fun. He decided to introduce himself to Chris, as did Liam, and could not help noticing the tiny gold cross around his neck. ‘Is everyone a bible-basher around here?’

‘No, I just live with Layne at the moment so I decided to humour him, and Roy, well, I don’t know about him, but it’s just a reminder for me.’

‘Ah ha, so they were right?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘You did have a brain injury.’

The truth burned inside Chris. He stepped away from the wall and circled one way and then the other until he could no longer contain himself. ‘I don’t have a brain injury. It’s convenient when you’re bashed in the head by men wanting money to claim that they hurt you more than they did. Wasn’t my idea and didn’t really help much.’

‘Convenient?’ Liam reacted sharply. ‘Everyone thinks you’re a walking vegetable.’

‘Ahh, then I fit right in.’ Chris raised his hand and waved to Layne who walked up with his usual slow stroll to quiz the teenagers.

‘These two givin’ you grief, Chris? Shall I set the supervisor on them?’ Layne said with a wink and a nudge.

‘No thanks Layne. Just smoothing out some ugly rumours.’

‘Aw yeah, about what?’

‘About a certain brain.’

‘OK,’ Layne went dead silent with no sign of a smile anymore. ‘What’s that?’

‘A brain injury,’ he repeated knocking his head with a gloved finger.

Awkward looks continued until Tim broke the silence with his usual material.

‘So Layne, run over anyone yet?’

Layne recoiled, but then came back with a smile. ‘Almost eh? Should have seen old Barb’s face.’

‘No thanks,’ Tim interrupted.

‘She thought I had it in for ‘er. Probably did if I told the truth. Didn’t even see her and you know the way she just storms on through without stopping. She could hear the forklift’s reverse signal. Ah well, next time, eh?’

The teenagers agreed, ‘Next time, yeah.’

‘Gave the shelving here a bit of a knock too, but I’m not the only one.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Aw, and the pet food pallet. Yeah ripped another bag of kibbled wheat again just last night. There’s just no light down that end of the storeroom. Took a good hour to clean all that up.’

‘So just the usual then.’

‘Peter will forgive me. That’s one thing that’s good about the boss. He doesn’t give you a barrel every time you break something.’

Liam took his turn to joke, saying, ‘He wouldn’t have the time.’

‘Too busy counting boxes,’ Tim said only half joking.

‘That’s for you jokers on Tuesday morning.’

Liam choked, ‘Again?’

‘Yep, second round of counting starts Tuesday,’ Tim said, preparing to get his trolley back in action. ‘We can’t all hide behind a brain injury.’

Chris laughed out loud and as the teens departed Layne leant in, saying, ‘I did that for your sake, Bud. Whatever you do now is up to you, but don’t make me look like an idiot for supporting you, eh?’

The conversation between Brittney and Karl had suddenly become audible for Layne and Chris. Layne who was intending to push on could not bring himself to leave so he inched out from the produce storeroom entrance staring the two of them down.

‘And she found her like that in the morning. Can you imagine that?’ Brittney froze as she caught Chris’ eye.

‘And with a hangover too,’ Karl said as compassionately as he could muster. It took a few seconds but he soon realised they were within earshot of the family they were just discussing. He started walking as he thought of something funny to alleviate the apparent tension. ‘I don’t know Britt, I don’t care what you say, she doesn’t look anything like her dad.’

Chris groaned and vanished behind the plastic strips.

Across the storeroom forty year old Carl was talking to the newest female to start in the grocery department, Cadence. He had taken the quiet and shy twenty

three year old under his wing and kept her spirits up by chatting about anything that came to mind. He had exhausted his knowledge of new technology, going into particular detail about those models he had purchased lately, and talked to death the newest films and TV programmes and how they were no better than what he grew up with.

While Carl did all the talking Cadence nodded and commented at such a low volume Carl had to guess what she said half the time. Finding it rude to ask her to repeat herself all the time, he found himself on a tangent he thought had been started by her regarding social networking profiles and how she had so many friends with names that started with a k-. 'Cadence and Carl...has a nice ring.'

Also feeling it was too rude to question what he had said, Cadence's eyes were questioning while she nodded and agreed, 'Yeah,' with a non-committal laugh.

Carl found the laugh contagious and ended up with tears in his eyes.

'Hey Carl, change your name.' The younger Karl interrupted as rudely as he wanted to be, given Cadence an opportunity to get her trolley past the forty year old. 'We've had this discussion before. By this time next week I expect another name on that name badge.'

'Or you'll have to start paying for the privilege of using a copyrighted trademark,' Bruss joined in, having come back out of the freezer to grab his workmate. He then pulled his mate's shirt to alert him to Peter's presence on the other side of the shelving unit.

'Of course,' Karl said backing away slowly. 'In fact you'll have to back-pay me for the usage, but I'll let you off if you change it completely, OK?'

'OK, what do you suggest I change it to?'

'I don't know. Paul or Pete, yeah Pete, so we can call you Paedo Pete.'

Someone further down the storeroom echoed the nickname with a laugh as Peter came around the shelving unit dressed in cricket whites with a tiny cap rounding off his round face, almost identical in every way to his foreign sidekick who stood uncomfortably looking around the dank storeroom, apart from the lack of a suntan and youthful, smooth looks.

'Hey Peter, Karl thinks I should change my name to Pete. Is that going to be a problem?'

Tim and Brad pushed their trolleys into the storeroom and changed their tone immediately on recognising the white gear. Tim shot off ahead saying, 'Boss is here to load up on beer. Back to top speed.'

'This is my top speed,' Brad said within earshot of the distracted manager.

'You've still got the same full boxes you went out with. How do you think you're going to get accepted for army training with that attitude?'

‘Yeah, but then I’ll actually be trying.’

‘Good call.’

Peter had coldly dismissed whatever it was Carl was alluding to, knowing that most of what came out of Carl’s mouth was an attempt to make a petty joke, and although Peter had a sense of humour there was no money to be made wasting it on pettiness. He called in the other guys, including Tim and Brad, and with his methodical and professional style introduced Kevin to the team.

‘I said I would sort out some extra help and here it is.’

‘Another Lenny?’ Carl asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

Sensing the cogs turning in Carl’s head as Carl would have remembered Lenny from the previous year, the first year he sponsored a cricket player who ended up playing more cricket than working, Peter talked over the top in the hope of pulling some better conversation out of the group. ‘So he’ll be starting in grocery on Tuesday.’

While Peter carried on the usual new-guy-nice-boss routine, Carl caught sight of younger Karl coming out of the freezer with Bruss.

The boss left himself suddenly open with the question, ‘So was there something you wanted to ask before, Carl.’

‘So will Kevin be getting a hat? You know like the ones butchery get to wear. Like the one Lenny got to wear that we asked for but never got.’

Peter jumped to the best option he thought he had, caught at a vulnerable moment. ‘Sure, before I go I’ll get you one.’ He laughed it off as a trivial request given his supreme power. ‘Does anyone else want a hat?’

Brad’s hand shot up as he mumbled to Tim, ‘I always wanted a hat. Just cause I’m leaving doesn’t mean I shouldn’t get a hat.’

It wasn’t that Tim cared, he was just shocked by how fast Brad had leapt at the chance. He put up his hand and asked for one too, and then shared the confused smiles with the others as none could really believe this turnaround.

Business was almost back to normal pace by the time Peter and Kevin had loaded the beer for the cricket team into his SUV. Liam was stuck waiting for Layne to get a pallet down for him and had been quizzed by Chris on how either young or old most of the grocery team was.

‘Well I’m fifteen so I get paid less for doing the same work. There’s a few more around like me, but we don’t need more money like others do. I don’t know how Layne and Carl and that manage on minimum wage. Brad and Tim are almost eighteen.’

‘You ever think of changing jobs?’

‘This is one of the only places that hire fifteen year olds or teenagers at all. Tim tried the works but he didn’t last long. You make good money but he thought it really wasn’t worth it to get sprayed with blood and shit most days. You wanna really annoy him you should call him “Buttplugger” although he’s given a similar name to another member of staff we all love.’

‘Is it Barb? I’ve run into her once or twice, thankfully not in a dark alley.’

‘No, don’t get me wrong Barb is scary - happy one moment then ripping you apart the next, and we all struggle with Maggie but she doesn’t deserve a nickname cos she is just doing her job. It’s Dianne you’ve got to watch. She’s like that kid in school who tells on everyone, who has no real friends and just makes it her business to ruin everyone’s fun - basically she never grew up, as in maturity-wise and height, and never moved out of home, never did anything but work here.’

‘The Buttplugger?’

‘The Plug. Tim thinks she looks like one.’

‘He’d know.’

‘Yep, he would,’ Liam agreed, laughing only for a moment. ‘Seriously, no one knows how old she is, or whether he really is a female or a cross-between... or both, and hey, it wouldn’t matter - no one wants to stir shit for no reason - but she makes you want to...’

‘Pull the plug?’

Layne could be heard yelling, ‘No, no, no,’ and Carl echoed in a cartoon voice even louder in an attempt to gather people’s attention. Liam, followed by Brad, pushed their trolleys into the main body of the storeroom just in time to see the corner stack of cartons toppling forward and then back with every jerky move of the forklift. Layne checked behind him again, preoccupied with who might be there, and knew he was losing the stack.

‘Bring it down,’ Carl cried sincerely trying to help, but another jerk sent the tower toppling again, this time leaning momentarily against the barrier of the forklift. ‘Just bring it down now, slowly.’

‘Hold on,’ Layne’s stressed voice spat out a few starts and stops of its own, never really coming to a conclusion. Every move seemed to be the opposite of what was needed.

Brad could see it happening before it started. ‘Here we go.’

Liam agreed, saying, ‘I can’t watch.’

‘Yes you can.’

Layne reversed and turned instead of lowering it down. Carl had almost come close enough to catch some of the cartons but kept his distance as the forklift could go any direction. The cartons hit the ground spreading out in a fan, some

having burst out of plastic wrap.

‘Who stacked that?’ Brad joked, as it was always the first excuse of a forklift driver in Layne’s position. ‘They’re still good.’

The liquid breakfast cartons which had fallen and skidded across the concrete were within Carl’s grasp. He firmly believed he could have them picked up and out of the way before Peter came back, but having only said, ‘Don’t move, I’ll get them,’ to Layne it had only bruised Layne’s ego further.

It was up to the forklift driver to sort this out so he quickly dropped the pallet and prepared to back out of the way, warning everyone in a garbled sentence while his head spun to check all blind spots.

Carl cried out that the pallet was now on top of a couple of eight-packs but anyone looking on could only see the rest of the stack following the others as Layne reversed. With Carl so close to forklift he couldn’t back away quick enough as a couple of cartons were crushed under the wheel. The liquid breakfast sprayed out in over his trousers and shoes, and then finished by coating the concrete in a huge splatter.

By this stage the entire team looked on and Layne finally gave up trying to minimise the impact by moving the forklift any further. The crowd soon gathered around to help but with Carl in the state that he was no one could stop laughing long enough to do anything.

Chris moved around the group in the direction of the mops and buckets pulling Liam with him. As soon as Tim came into view he let out an angry yell having missed the fun and quickly caught up with Brad on the details. Chris and Liam moved around the forklift just as Peter and Kevin strolled up. In the manager’s hands were three new uniform hats which he one by one handed to each of the bystanders, lastly and reluctantly handing one over to Carl.

Carl had to take the opportunity to lighten the mood as best he could, asking, ‘Do you have any trousers too?’ He did a little dance while turning around with his new hat.

Peter surely could only think of the quality of his employees, as he scanned the crowd and then Layne’s expression. The portly man’s reaction was to try to explain and then apologise as if he had run someone down. Peter could only ignore him and wonder what he had achieved giving in to their requests for hats. It would have seemed unprofessional to have refused and even more so if he had not followed through.

However much Layne thought his head was on the chopping block, the look on the manager’s face said he would rather be playing cricket and drinking beer. He and Kevin offered light-hearted remarks as they departed. Chris looked on, studying Peter’s inexpressive face.

‘It’s sad,’ Chris said, holding the mop as Liam caught up with the bucket. ‘To one person it looks like a huge waste, like a day’s worth of wages in one mistake - it’s real loss and real bruised pride. And it takes a real businessman to be that indifferent to it all, as if there really was no value in that stock and in that pride.’

Liam shrugged his shoulders and carried the bucket forward while Brad confirmed, ‘Only eighteen packs broken. The rest are fine, really.’

The growl of the SUV caught Chris’ attention. A puff of black smoke drifted into the busy storeroom as the vehicle left. None of the others noticed as they committed in one way or another to making the mess go away, both on the floor and in Layne’s head. There was a team here after all, but no thanks to the owner.

With a takeaway coffee cup in one hand and a clipboard in the other, Peter carried out the box count for the second time that month. It was part of the plan to highlight efficiency in the workplace, a follow up to the guide he had worked on with Maggie, and Barb and the other supervisors. This guide had provided new staff as well as previously inducted staff with every detail they needed in order to carry out their duties including proper trolley stacking, also providing them with photos of each type of trolley and the expected capacity.

The favourite for the staff was the photos which demonstrated how to face-up shelves. Some staff had been facing-up for years and were still taken through the manuals on how to pull two items in each line forward, follow the shelf from left to right, and then how to find the starting point on each consecutive shelf.

Unfortunately the manual could never deal with anything practical, like the lack of mentoring for new staff or the complicated systems for working through different bays in the storeroom which were set down by aggressive women who cared little to pass on the correct steps or helpful hints until the new member of staff had failed them. Only then would a staff member who had been shifted around the bays as the women wished, for whatever reason, actually receive the required information to fulfil their tasks. They learned quickly that if they started chatting and in particular started complaining that they would be moved to heavier products or more time-consuming bays. No manual prepared them for this.

There was no shortage of teenagers new to paid work, whose first trial was actually struggling to understand what was expected of them in the first days and weeks, sometimes a full week between shifts and often Layne and Carl, or any other friendlier experienced co-worker would take the place of trainer or mentor explaining what it was like when they started. This was how Carl had become indispensable to Cadence. No one else had bothered to ask if she knew what she was doing and she never wanted to bother anyone with questions. Carl and his

expert eye could see when she was going to run into trouble with her bay and had stepped in whenever possible.

It was this closer contact that many would look on as inappropriate despite its innocent intentions, and it was this contact which introduced Carl to a concept he had never considered. Cadence was part of one of the many small churches in Oamaru, her father one of the heads of the church. Carl had been invited to attend by the father, as was every odd male who started cruising and commenting on Cadence's social networking profile.

Carl had already been in trouble that morning by comparing Peter to Hitler. He pushed his trolley past the manager avoiding eye contact, staring at the coffee cup and clipboard instead. He tried to catch up to Layne to tell him the good news without considering the spies willing to catch him in the act and get him in the office a second time that morning.

'Layne, I have some good news. The Good News in fact.'

'Can't talk Bud, Dianne's out in force today. 'Parrently she's not part of this box count thingy 'cause she's got her own wee department, got an order to do or something. Still, she seems to have plenty of time for gas-bagging.'

'Relax, she's busy showing Kevin how to do her job.'

'Aw yeah,' Layne said still struggling with being so closely monitored and having Carl slow him down. 'Sorry, what's this about good news?'

'Very good news. I got invited to church and I ended up going just because Marty invited me. It's not so bad. Got given a bible and everything. Think I'll keep it up.'

Layne had had his struggles with religion in his time. He had brought up the topic of Christianity in the staffroom only to be religiously ignored, even while Roy sat in the corner reading his own edition of the Bible and keeping very silent about it. If he was honest it had been a bit of competition to drop the odd reference into a personal conversation on the long lunch breaks, something to keep him occupied and keep him from falling asleep or getting bogged down with other people's issues. Currently he had shelved his own bible and toned down his attitude, it was after all very personal and not something you got into on a whim.

He had remained awkwardly silent for long enough, looking like he was processing a stack of memories which related to this very moment. All he could say was, 'Why?'

'Aww, just thought it was time to think about these things I guess.'

Layne looked past his friend to see Cadence pushing her trolley and spilling her boxes onto the shop floor as she avoided Barb who steamed through without slowing at all. He had always been considered a less educated person and vague

at times, often depressive to the point of discussing suicide like the weather, but he tested his clarity at the odd time and it often paid off. 'You're not going to old Marty's church, Cadence's dad, are ya?'

'Yes,' Carl said, beaming away as if he was congratulating Layne on guessing correctly.

Layne had to shake his head and move away. 'Convenient isn't it?'

'Yeah, what? As in?'

'Look Bud, I gotta get a move on. We're all on the clock.'

Carl accepted he'd better get moving too and pushed his trolley in the opposite direction with an awkward smile on his face as if trying to project a halo.

It was this weird expression that made Jade think that Carl was related to the overweight girl with learning difficulties who often walked slowly past the deli with a ridiculously big grin on her face saying hello to everyone. She didn't think this for very long as Maggie walked up to him and started whispering with a stone-faced look.

The conversation finished with Maggie pulling away slowly, assertively and with no chance of being misunderstood. Jade managed to hear, 'So we can't have some with and some without.'

To which Carl tried to debate, 'So why offer it to staff then?'

'That wasn't Peter's call to make, sorry. He can offer all he likes, but the buck stops with me.'

Carl pulled the cap off his head and tried to hand it over to her, but she put up her hands, saying, 'It's yours. Are we clear? You can wear it out the back, outside, to and from work, but not on the shop floor. Are we clear then?'

With the built-up tension of a long-standing disagreement, the tone and quickness with which each reacted to the other's comments, Jade was sure this was an average day for both and that poor Carl who had the intelligence to hold his own ground had no power to draw on to defend himself.

Dejected, he put the cap in his back pocket and walked past the deli avoiding any eye contact.

'I don't know, we'll ask her,' Dianne said in response to Kevin's questioning of areas he was being expected to cover. She called in a high-pitched singing voice which from her came out sounding like an adolescent male, 'Barbie, I'd like to introduce you to our new guy. This is Kevin. He's the new Lenny.'

'The new Lenny? Oh, fantastic,' Barb said without looking at him, broadcasting her hidden contempt behind a sarcastic and saccharine tone.

Kevin said hello, broadcasting his accent back at her.

Barb finally looked at him and raised her eyes. 'Lenny was the last Pom who

was paid to play cricket for Peter.'

'This time he works for us though. He's been picking it all up pretty fast.'

'Fantastic. You'll be able to show some of them how it's done.'

'I'll try.'

Barb looked him up and down again and asked, 'You're OK for uniform?'

'Yes, some of the others mentioned we weren't allowed to wear these caps, is that right?'

'Peter gave it to you?'

'That's right.'

'It's Peter's choice then. Wear it all you like.'

'Oh my god,' Tim said having heard at least Barb's side of the conversation from the next aisle. He returned to the secret conference with Brad and Liam fuming, 'I can't believe it. It's like they do it on purpose. Barb just let Kevin wear his cap after the rest of us have been told to take ours off.'

'And you're surprised?' Brad asked plainly.

Liam offered, 'They're going to be extra nice to him because he's new then rip the shit out of him later.'

'This is why I'm glad I'm leaving,' Brad said.

Tim tried to listen to both conversations. Something like an explanation of his duties was going on. He had to shake his head and take a deep breath, thinking about university. 'Yep. Bring on study.'

'Bring on early mornings and exercising,' Brad one-upped him with a cynical tone.

Liam let out a short laugh and put things into perspective. 'Ah, sounds like things would be better here.'

'Bring on the flood of girls then,' Tim countered.

'Bring on getting paid to train.'

'Bring on nightclubs and...'

Liam cut in. 'Bring on Brad teaching me how to make a bomb.'

The line went silent. In the distance Barb could now be heard laughing in the stereotypical witch-like cackle that sounded completely fake. They were actually having a laugh while the others were in the middle of a box count. Tim held his tongue about these others and tried to put Liam in his place.

'Are you saying that if I go off to Uni and Brad is off to army training that you're greatest achievement this year would be blowing the supermarket up?'

'At least part of it,' Liam answered.

Brad deliberately avoided trying to be serious at such an early and depressing hour. He instead made light of the conversation also. 'Could that part be Maggie's office?'

‘The storeroom?’

‘Nooo, think of the waste - all that sweet, sweet energy drink wasted.’

‘Peter’s office?’

‘I don’t know - just plant it right underneath the Plug’s seat when she’s making her huge order for the tiny hardware department.’

‘Could the bomb *be* a plug?’

‘Shove it in her mouth.’

‘Just leave it upstairs in the staffroom with the other samples, she’ll eat it.’

‘Will do.’

The three of them met up with well-practiced timing and cruised past the deli silently taking a look at the girls.

‘Just don’t blow up the new girl,’ Tim said to Liam. ‘Whatever you do.’

Brad asked, ‘Didn’t I hear that her mother died some horrible death that no one heard about?’

‘How did they hear about it then?’ Tim asked, mimicking Brad’s low tone.

‘She told Edie,’ Liam answered.

‘Oh, so everybody knows then...except me?’

‘Brittney told us late Saturday night after you’d gone home and left me with all your boxes to clean up,’ Liam said.

Tim pushed a box off Liam’s trolley just as they passed the butchery. The butchery manager, Matt Hays, looked up from the chiller he was checking and turned to them, commenting in a big brotherly tone, ‘Grow up Tim.’

Tim flapped about muttering and then picked up the box saying sorry to Liam.

‘You catch up with Campbell much?’ Matt asked surprising Tim with a question he had been asked a lot at school but not so much at work.

‘Not since last year when he was helping out at basketball practice. We caught up every now and then. I was going to catch up this year, but...’

‘Well, if you see him around...’

‘I’ll have to get him on the court.’

The teenagers dragged themselves away from the awkward conversation.

Brad declared, ‘That was weird.’

Tim caught up and came back with, ‘We played every now and then. He’s alright. Just cos he has a witch for a grandmother doesn’t make him bad.’

‘I mean Matt calling you out like that. Everyone’s in such a great mood.’

‘The world’s a messed up place.’

Liam began the charge into the storeroom, saying, ‘Here we go.’

Normally the storeroom would be where they did their chatting, away from customers, and where the bulk of the work happened - the principle reason why

Peter was often never out there. Now that he was, and more often was, the shop floor had become the more common meeting place and they all charged through the storeroom just to load up and move about silently like robots.

Chris Ridge pushed the pallet of produce a few metres more and then waited for the teens to pass. Tim and Brad put their caps back on and showed them off, saying 'All clear, go, go, go,' as they walked past the old man. The pallet moved in behind them slowly and a stubborn Dianne had to stop and back her trolley up so it could come through.

Peter, still standing by the door, tried to get Chris' attention but the old man seemed hard of hearing or deep in concentration.

He manoeuvred the pallet into the produce department and saw Dianne in the corner of his eye. As exhausted as he was from pushing he still had the energy to have a bit of fun. He stopped and leaned over, saying, 'Hello little girl, this area is for staff only. Thank you for returning the trolley and thank you for shopping with us.'

Dianne screwed her face up and charged forward without saying anything. Peter stared blankly ahead after taking another sip from the cup and cleared his throat.

The old man managed to get the pallet into position, but as this was his fifth he could not pretend it was getting a bit much. Once inside the produce department he leant on the pallet and caught his breath, holding a painful groan inside.

Dianne caught up with Tim and Brad and immediately called them out. 'Nice hats guys.'

'Nice eyebrow Dianne,' Tim said under his breath.

Brad talked over the top of her protest, 'We're allowed to wear them out here.'

'Yeah, but why? You just look stupid.'

'You're not even a supervisor, Dianne, so please stop getting involved.'

As soon as Kevin made it back to the storeroom wearing his hat Carl reacted wildly and called the others over. 'Should I say something?'

'I think you should Carl,' Dianne said in a monotone voice.

'If you don't, I will,' Tim said taking off his cap and throwing it on a trolley.

'No, I want to,' Carl said stepping towards the boss who was involved in a conversation with Kevin now. He had to wave his arms to get the attention he wanted. 'Hey, Peter, what's this all about? You give with one hand and take away with the other, yet some people are still allowed to wear their hats? What's going on?'

Peter could only give the blindest stare, the look of someone who was tired

of being talked down to by one of his least paid and least valuable workers. He was sincerely confused by the statements Carl was making. It would take all his professionalism to patiently wait for the proper explanation. He was surprised to find it came from Jade, who had slipped through the plastic doors behind Peter and understood that look on Carl's face immediately.

'Oh, Peter, this is probably in relation to the rude talking to that Maggie gave him, about wearing hats of all things,' she said taking some of the tension out of the situation with a laugh. 'It was a pretty stern way of asking him to only wear it off the shop floor, which didn't really make much sense.'

'Exactly,' Carl agreed emphatically as if his own mother had come in and defended him at a pivotal moment.

Kevin was confused. 'I thought we were supposed to wear them. That cranky lady was telling me just before I filled the hardware aisle.'

'What were you doing filling the hardware aisle?' Peter asked jumping on another tangent straight away.

'So what's it going to be?' Carl restated the position. 'One rule for all? Hats on or hats off?'

Rudely, Layne pushed Carl out of the way and directed his trolley straight through the conference. He paused for a moment so that Peter could count the boxes and looked around wondering what everyone was looking at. Peter did not respond so Layne shrugged his shoulders and pushed through the plastic doors saying hello to Jade in as neutral a tone as any robot would.

A chorus of laughter and calls distracted the members of this temporary stop-work meeting. The high school juniors had swarmed through the produce department in their hordes. Peter caught Chris' attention and presuming he was a wise and clear-headed individual asked him if he could manage the school bag situation at the door. He left the grocery department to sort itself out, thinking twice about carrying on with the box count. At the entrance the bags had already started piling up and landing in front of the doors.

Peter had just enough time to position Chris where the students would see him with arms pointing at the appropriate place to leave the bags but without further instruction. The manager sped off to catch up with Maggie and in front of the checkout staff the two engaged in as close to an argument as they could without getting personal.

Peter was an outsider, not a local, and therefore not the same as locals like Maggie. It didn't mean much to him but it was an essential difference in this town. As professional as he could be, rational and diplomatic, it was still a battle of attitudes, and of realities, and all it took was some black and white wise words to cut through Peter's naturally bureaucratic speech.

‘A few members of staff expressed the need for hats which I sorted on Saturday...’

‘The grocery team has a uniform and hats are not part of it. You made the rules and I’m just enforcing them. There’s no two ways about it.’

‘The rule in this scenario doesn’t exclude...’

‘Peter,’ Maggie’s hand sat on her hip, the head dropped and fell on an angle so that her long hair whipped about. ‘I am the grocery manager. I am doing my job. You made the rules and I am following them. You wanted the grocery team to all look the same, you wanted them all to carry the same amount on their trolleys and all face-up at the same time for the same amount of time. If you want robots, you’ll get them, but don’t start giving them a say in things - you can’t have it both ways.’

‘In this situation...’

‘In this situation you gave three of the biggest stirrers in the team something to hold against the rest of the team. It’s just not going to work if you give me rules to enforce and then break them for those ones who are playing up. I’ve already had complaints from staff.’

Even the checkout staff knew who Maggie was talking about. There really was only one place the complaints came from, but it was not as if Peter could get away with ignoring complaints when they were reported by the grocery manager.

If he had had his way there would be no disagreement between himself, the owner, and her. He knew this was her territory as was given her by the last owner who kept out of the operations altogether. It wasn’t Peter’s style to let Maggie have all the power, not with the training, first-hand experience and life experience that he had had. It was another obvious fact, even for the checkout staff, that his experience meant nothing when he had Maggie on the job.

She, and the bulk of the long-serving staff, were from another time and another place, where people were judged by their rigidity and their reluctance to change or try new things. It meant that they were strong, clear-headed, infallible and loudly certain of all these traits. At times she had had to use all these traits and carry the bulk of the operations on her back to keep things running. She’d outlasted flimsier and tougher bosses than Peter and made it clear every day that she wouldn’t be put in a box, certainly not the box Peter wanted her in.

So Peter, who had not finished a sentence during the whole conversation, started retreating. ‘We can carry this conversation on at our weekly meeting.’

Maggie was distracted by the sight outside. She mumbled her agreement and then showed him. ‘Your scarecrow isn’t working.’

Chris was up to his thighs in school bags, still holding his arms out mimicking Peter’s last gesture. This meant some of the students had hung their

bags on his arms and he stood frozen looking up at the sky as if appealing to the great Christian god. Inside, he was asking the world and himself why he had fallen from grace to such a subhuman level.

While Chris looked up and held the pose in his own version of defiance, Andy walked past carefully placing his feet in the spaces in between school bags and entered the supermarket without even seeing the familiar old man.

He found his way to Maggie and was told in an assertive tone that she did not deal with local specialty products such as fancy-looking, upmarket honey. She directed him to the deli while scanning the aisles and finding something of particular interest in the direction of the teenage workers.

Andy was able to follow her a few metres before she switched to walking backwards still hurriedly and telling him to sign in first. He stopped and watched Maggie deal to Tim only half knowing where he needed to sign in and more interested in her handling of the staff member who had been caught with an earpiece in. Andy could only be impressed with her ability to stand over someone who was taller than her.

He signed in typing his name into a console which then prepared a sticker for him to wear and was distracted by the self-service checkouts which blared their welcome and instructions from tiny speakers to every school kid in the seething crowd. When he looked down no sticker had been spat out and Peter came around the customer service desk just in time to notice his confusion. Andy tried to introduce himself as Peter changed the roll, but he was also distracted before giving him the best part of his attention.

Through the swarm of leaving students, two men in suits and another who wore a loose wool vest over his shirt, all in various shades of dark grey or black, headed towards the entrance. Peter rushed to put the console back together and without concentrating wished Andy a good day and then met the group as they came around to the customer service desk.

Peter recognised the first man to put out his hand, Jim Staples, the mayor introduced the McJimray's corporation representative and his shadow. The name Brian Kitchener was mentioned as a guest manager, and for Andy the conversation only grew more foreign.

After a chorus of laughter for no apparent reason except to vent abundant nervous energy, Brian stepped out of the group and scanned the checkouts, saying, 'I love the self-service kiosks - a very personal experience.'

'MJs has the same idea to deal with the surges,' the shadow mentioned, 'However the on-screen presentation is more like a narrative. The customer will watch someone else having a pleasant transaction and follow their actions.'

'So you were telling me,' Brian responded sincerely interested.

To Peter the shadow explained, 'And even senses the customer's sex, age and ethnicity so that they see a representation they can relate to on the screen. People have been known to immediately perform a second transaction just to test the intelligence of the system.'

'It tests my intelligence just thinking about it,' Brian said to Peter with an infectious laugh that caught the checkout staff's attention.

Andy still stood at the console and filled the details in again watching the engaged faces of the staff. One called out, 'Are we all invited to the opening night?'

Caught off-guard Brian immediately responded with a smile and a characteristic over-pronunciation of at least one syllable in each statement, 'Of co-ourse you all are. The first day is o-only for locals.'

'Is it free?'

'Admission for locals is a-always free. Only those beaming in from the outside need pay for the experience.'

'Georgina is going to Christchurch just so she can use the transporter.'

Another checkout operator asked, 'Is she? Why?'

Again laughing to pull attention back to himself Brian wrapped up the public broadcast, 'The transpo-orter is an experience in itself. Believe me it's we-ell worth it, but for those entering on foot the sale will blo-ow you away and you'll forget instantly whichever way you arrived there. But don't forget to make the experience even more personal by visiting the fantasy suites - you share a little about yourself and your shopping experience will be personalised beyond belief!'

'Well gentlemen, let's take this up to my office,' Peter said over the top of the ladies sharing their expectations of the sale.

Andy finally found the sticker half crumpled inside the exit slot. He tried to unfold it and couldn't. Brian looked over at him and asked if they were signing in, but Peter shook his head. They were ushered away leaving Andy with his stuck-together label. He threw it on the desk and walked away from the console wanting nothing more than to forget he had ever heard of McJimray's Globomart.

Looking like any other representative who was new to the supermarket Andy caught the eyes of the butchery guys first, was then ignored when he walked past, and found the deli with a whole other set of eyes to make contact with. Edie, with her half smile and desperate-to-serve-first waddle, closed in and twirled around when she saw the folder in his hand.

'Oh you want Brittney. Just a moment,' Edie said giving Jade a raised eyebrow.

Jade was surprised at the sight. She couldn't move as a feeling of anxiousness took over, but as Andy waved to her the confidence came back. She moved closer and tried on a southern girl familiarity, the type that she had since perfected while dealing with customers over the deli counter. 'It's the tattooed thigh man. Peddling honey are ya? What a surprise.'

'Yes, you got it. It's all part of the making of something - you produce it, you've got to sell it.'

It was disastrously quick how the familiarity broke down as there was no more common ground to go over.

'You don't say.'

Brittney came to take Andy away, and when he saw Jade's eager stare he looked for a way to continue the conversation.

'You'll have to tell me how you're settling in some time,' he said as he was led away.

'Good,' Jade said, wondering why she'd want to answer the question with one word so fast. 'And you'll have to tell me about...' She looked down at his leg and raised her eyebrows, too committed to the act that she couldn't stop until he understood.

To Brittney and Edie it looked as if she was chatting him up in the weirdest way they had ever seen, wondering why she was looking at his crotch and insinuating something.

'...the story behind...that tattoo.' No matter how she finished the sentence she couldn't avoid the barrage of questions these women would ask over such an awkward thing to say. She swallowed and wondered if she shouldn't have left so many gaps in her sentences. Edie held back her laughter and Brittney her annoyance at being delayed.

'Everyone knows they use them the same,' Tim spoke up to Maggie just inside the storeroom entrance.

'They are for communicating across the store, Tim, not for talking to your friends in the next aisle.'

'That doesn't mean they still don't...'

'I'm not going to argue with you, Tim. Others can moderate their use of them, using them for what they're there for. Sort it out.'

'Why am I the only one who gets told off?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's not just me.'

Maggie circled around him as if to get a clear look at who was listening. 'You know what, Tim? It really is just you these days. Everyone seems to be able to get it together, but you're just not getting it. Do you want me to bring up

Saturdays again?’

‘What now?’

‘Stocking the shelves? Instead of stocking up the four-packs you just pulled them forward.’

‘What?’

‘They are the best sellers in the department and every time I walk down that aisle, but particularly Saturday, they’re not filled.’

‘Yeah, because they sell, and I’m only here until four.’

‘Doesn’t matter. This has been going on long enough.’

‘What? Products selling has been going on long enough?’

‘Talking back, not pulling your weight.’

‘Not pulling my weight?’

‘I measured the stock last week and checked the sales. No sales early on in the week and only two on the shelf? What do you think that means? Argue with that.’ Maggie turned and walked away.

Tim was glad to finally get moving but it was not going to show with all the rage that had to be vented. It didn’t matter how many people were around, he pushed his trolley into the corner and threw boxes at it swearing uncontrollably, spitting and hissing as if he had opened a high-pressure valve. This tirade set off a chain of events, parts moving as if like well-designed clockwork - the first movement watched closely by Carl as Dianne dawdled past him on her way to see Maggie.

A handheld scanner edged through the plastic strips of the produce department in Chris’ shaking hand. He walked over to Tim and took his time finding the four packs. Then right in front of Tim, scanned the products and showed him the sales history.

‘I’m old. Can’t read these things that well, but that’s last week’s sales is it not?’

‘Yep.’

‘Any sales early in the week?’

‘Yep.’

‘When were they bought?’

‘After four.’

‘But you finish at four Tim. Who fill’s that shelf when you’re not here?’

Tim controlled his anger and answered the question slowly, ‘Barb.’

Chris sat on a half pallet of boxes of soft drink. ‘Sounds like the old girl likes to stretch the truth when it suits her. I don’t suppose Barb is going to back you over her either.’

Tim shook his head.

‘Still. How many boxes thrown around is going to make up for that? Makes you feel like a rat in a cage. Yet, they’re old - they don’t have the options you do. This is how they feel powerful. Don’t let them win by making a scene. They’ve won as soon as you lose it.’

Carl could see Dianne, Barb and Maggie at the storeroom entrance, lingering for only one obvious reason. The others left Dianne to do what she did best. She walked straight up to Carl and in her slimy way attempted to coerce his support.

She sighed as if to express feelings that had long since been replaced with tactics. ‘The team can’t have swearing like that out here. I know Marty wouldn’t approve. It was lucky Cadence wasn’t around.’

Carl looked at her only on the side, but could not disagree. He nodded and then contradicted his own gestures. ‘I swear too much. I’d admit that, but so does Barb and Maggie, so do you.’

Instead of reacting to another of Carl’s automatic accusations, she lowered her voice and watched Chris and Tim talk in the distance. ‘There’s been a complaint and looks like Tim will be up for a disciplinary meeting.’

It made Carl feel important to have secret information passed on to him despite knowing how this cog worked. It did not last long because the proximity to Dianne always made him feel uneasy. ‘Who complained?’

‘A member of management. A male member of management.’

‘Who? You mean that butchery guy? I saw him over at the cardboard crusher, but he wouldn’t care about that, would he? He wouldn’t do that.’

‘Matt?’

‘Yeah Matt, I think. I don’t know his name. He’s management. I guess he could have complained. He was the closest. But it’s not like he’d be the only one complaining.’

‘It’s just got out of hand, Carl. It would be best if you went to Peter and told him what you saw or heard too.’

‘What? Be a nark?’

Dianne knew as soon as she saw the shaking head that she would make no difference by talking any longer. In her last attempt she tried with all her physical acting skills to make him feel as if it meant he was going down too. ‘Oh well, you could have helped by showing we wouldn’t stand for it. I gave you the chance.’

She walked back towards the storeroom exit and immediately headed for butchery as if on a mission of the highest order.

Tim got the picture that Chris was trying to talk so much that he’d be forced to change the subject if he didn’t want to get more frustrated. It helped to think of Jade and her mother, being in a worse situation than he was in, and the fact

that Jade's father was standing right there was pretty sobering.

'I don't mean to be rude, but a friend of mine lost someone close to him and I don't know if a lot of people around him can really relate - I know I can't. I don't know the whole story with you but what was it like when you lost your wife?'

Chris straightened up and tried to release a few bone-grinding cracks to disguise his sudden shock. He grunted and struggled to say anything.

'I shouldn't have asked.' Tim looked visibly shamed. He had already resisted feeling disempowered by the older women and then to lose his temper in front of everyone made him feel immature. He didn't want to come across as mature as such but he also didn't want too many people knowing how mature he actually was. Now he was overstepping the mark by far and went back to moving boxes in as callous a way as was usual.

'No, no, that's fair - you're asking for guidance, but I...I honestly...well, what have you heard exactly?'

Andy and Jade took a break together finding a space outside at the back of the store where the smokers had set up chairs and a can. At least there was a bit of wind to take the smell away and some sun to give them a reason to sit and relax.

'The honeymoon is almost over.'

'How do you mean?'

'That period where you glow as you come into work and feel like you're paid a suitable amount for your time because you haven't worked at all in a while.'

'When you could do anything for work and it's full of meaning and importance.'

'And I think I only have myself to blame for making it uncomfortable.'

'It's just the way you look at it I suppose.'

'No, I mean as in I told a big, fat lie to see how bad people gossip around here, just to know where I stood with people, and it can only backfire now.'

'Oh.'

'I mean at first it was nice, saying hello to everyone, and everyone would ask you about your weekend and you'd share stories - people are like sponges, thirsty for news, but I would just say nothing of importance had happened since I came back from travelling. Easiest way to stop a conversation you actually wanted to have? Talk about international travel in a small town. Talk about cities and new experiences, culture clashes and overnight trains, and they'll change the subject in a second. So, knowing they only wanted gossip, I made up a story they wanted to hear.'

'And now you have to tell me.'

‘I told them that my mother died...a cancer-related death. Well, died while being treated for cancer. The story changed a little the more people asked me about it. She developed an infection - toxoplasmosis which resulted in a seizure which then resulted in a fall which resulted in a bang to the head which she did not recover from.’

‘Oh, wow, the detail.’

‘Oh, and I found her body,’ Jade said raising her hand to her mouth to stop from laughing at the horrible lie. ‘I found her after a big night out on the town, an all-nighter where I stayed at my new boyfriend’s place. So, I came in to the kitchen and found her the morning after the fall in a great, big pool of blood.’

‘You’re going to hell for that.’

‘Can you imagine how many times I’m going to be told to go to hell too? They’ll never forgive me. But at present, I don’t know enough people to know just how far the story has gone. I’m dying to know - no pun intended.’

Tim realised after listing the snippets of the story he had heard that he could actually see Jade from where he stood. Through the enormous roller door he and then Chris both watched her talking with Andy, smiling in the sun with the occasional unsure expression, animated and cheerful despite the tragedy.

Chris felt like throwing up. It was a wave of nausea he knew he could suppress having had ample experience. ‘So to answer your question then...how do you think I feel, I mean felt?’

Neither looked at the other, just staring into the distance projecting the details of the story onto this character.

Tim screwed up his face. ‘It’s horrible. It really puts things in perspective.’

‘It really does,’ Chris echoed, the John Benjamin inside cringing at the mess he’d found himself in. ‘That poor girl. What have I done? You know, thank you Tim for being man enough to talk to me about that.’

‘But you haven’t told me what might help in that situation.’

‘Ah, I wouldn’t know,’ he said with a flustered tone, breathing heavily.

‘Yeah you would - it happened to you.’

‘No, it didn’t.’ Chris looked at the young man. His face was deathly serious. He shook his head uncontrollably and confessed, ‘I’m not Chris Ridge.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not her father.’ He swore under his breath. ‘Swearing feels good, doesn’t it? Not good enough though. No, honesty feels better. I’m not Chris Ridge, Tim. Oh god that feels good. You’re the first person I’ve told that.’

‘Told what?’

‘Well, who do I look like?’

Tim shook his head trying not to be cheeky with his answer.

‘Who do I look like? Come on. You must see the resemblance. I’m John Benjamin.’

Carl walked slowly up to the two of them unable to hear what intense conversation they were having.

‘Say it with me,’ he whispered now, grabbing Tim’s arms, ‘I’m John Benjamin, I’m John Benjamin...and I’ve made a big mistake.’

Chris left Tim to share his blank expression with Carl. Carl himself was burning to tell Tim about Dianne’s attempt at extortion, but he was distracted by the haunted look on Tim’s face. ‘What’s happened now?’

Layne also joined the conversation, leaving his trolley and commenting loudly, ‘Looked a bit pale didn’t he? You give him up shake up, Tim? Sneak up behind him and yell, did you?’

Tim answered in his most uncaring tone, ‘He just said he was John Benjamin and then walked off.’

‘Sometimes I think I should pack it up and move to town,’ Andy said after taking a look at the hill-line. ‘It’s good to be on the coast. I could give it another try.’

‘Where were you brought up?’

‘Here and there. Mostly north. I’ve lived on the coast or at least near enough for most of my life.’

‘Then you should...move here I mean.’

‘Work in a supermarket?’

‘And work in a supermarket. Or make honey locally.’

‘And take the Island Queen with me.’

‘The what?’ Jade asked with a mixture of confusion and fascination.

‘The Island Queen.’ Andy didn’t know where to start.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Jade presumed the worst, looking for a wedding ring and not finding one, ‘Bring her along of course.’

Layne left his trolley at the produce department entrance and pushed through the strips to call Chris over to him. He looked around to make sure no one could hear and then got to the point in a silent rage. ‘What are ya playin’ at?’

‘Hmmm?’ Chris asked pointing his nose up in the air and breathing deeply.

‘You didn’t think I had to wrestle everyday with not telling anyone who you really were? I’ve held out pretty well considerin’ the funny way you go about hidin’ your identity. Lucky for you, they all think you’re crazy and still think you’re an impersonator who doesn’t know when enough is enough.’

Peter had managed to pull the grocery team together in the storeroom. Maggie and Barb had herded them in from the store, letting various departments know along the way. The little crowd had to wait in anticipation to hear what the

boss thought was so important.

Carl couldn't contain himself. 'You're not handing out hats again are you, Peter?'

Cadence could only smile while Carl laughed at his own joke.

Brad looked at Tim, saying, 'Maybe it's a crackdown on swearing.'

'Maybe it's your leaving party,' Tim responded.

Maggie and Barb, followed by Dianne and other members of staff, pushed through the plastic doors and engaged Peter in a progress report.

Barb caught Carl and Tim staring at Dianne and whispering. She stared back and asked, 'Do you want to share your thoughts with the rest of us, Tim?'

He left no pause. 'I was just commenting on how everyone looked very happy with themselves.'

'Why wouldn't we be?'

'I don't know. Some days are more productive than others I guess.'

The butchery team came out the back entrance and interrupted Andy and Jade by mentioned an impromptu staff meeting. Jade was content to back out of the conversation at that point, unsure of the queen Andy was referring to and confused at why she avoided asking.

At the back of the storeroom she was just within earshot of the heated exchange and presumed it was a follow-on from the hat incident. 'Oh god, things get blown out of proportion quickly.'

They stayed just outside and watched Layne and Chris slowly move to the back of the growing crowd having their own dispute. Layne's head swayed left to right almost compulsively as he spoke.

'What on earth is he doing here?' Andy asked himself.

'Who?'

'The old man.'

'That's my father.'

His blood had run cold and he squinted to make sure he was not mistaken. 'That's your father? He said he was like a hundred and eighty years old or something.'

'What? You'd have to be a lot richer than that to be...'

Layne could just about be heard telling Chris he was on his own. The old man flew into a rage as if he was poked from all angles.

'I've always been on my own you self-righteous ass!'

'Swearing? Swearing? Of all things, I'm going to get fired over swearing!' Tim's rage now drowned out the others. He looked at Matt who was standing by Peter having a quiet discussion. 'I admit I flew off the handle, but a disciplinary meeting?'

Peter raised his hands, completely confused with Matt looking equally taken aback by the statements. 'What disciplinary meeting?'

Edie jumped in to cool Tim down, trying to get some details out of him while Barb threw comments at anyone who would listen in an even worse rage than Tim.

'Is this you stirring again, Carl?' Dianne called out.

'I saw you lurking. You're the only one who cares so much about complaining.'

'That's enough Carl,' Maggie shot him down. 'You've a way with words...'

Chris couldn't help himself. 'And you've a way with the truth!'

Maggie stood silently shocked.

Dianne seemed to shake off her surprise, offhandedly asking, 'What do you know, old man?'

'Buttplug!' Tim yelled with a roar from Brad, Liam and Carl.

Edie in her own way agreed with Tim's reaction and defended Chris, 'I agree - plug it up Dianne. What a terrible thing to say.'

Peter could not choose his target so yelled over the top and brought his hands down into a loud clap. 'I have some news that I felt needed to be shared with you all right away. I have just had a meeting with the mayor and representatives of McJimray's Globomart which you all should know by now is arriving in Oamaru in two weeks. What you might not have known is McJimray's takes on a guest manager for the length of the sale - which has already been chosen so don't look at me - and works in with the local area to provide employment for the length of the sale for anyone with customer service and store operations experience. It is a large market - I'm sure you all know just how large - and they need a lot of people. It seems to be their regular approach to work with the council and local business owners to rally a team to meet these needs...'

'What's so funny about a buttplug, Buttplugger?' Dianne finally asked as the giggles grew into uncontrollable coughs.

Tim traced her pear-shaped outline.

'Stop it, Tim. Or I'll tear you a new one,' Barb threatened.

Layne coughed and spoke up, 'Like you tore Chris a new one? You need a muzzle.'

Brad, Liam and Tim couldn't help yelling 'Ohhh' at the same time, impressed by Layne's quickness.

With a sigh, Peter finished his introduction to the McJimray's team, '...and you're it.'

'Wait, we're what?' Maggie asked.

'You're it. You're the team running the McJimray's supermarket.'

‘What would we be doing?’ Brittney asked.

‘The same jobs you’re doing now, transferring those skills to a bigger storeroom and department, or if you’re in the fresh departments then where possible taking a general purpose role.’

Eddie coughed, ‘General purpose? I’m not so sure about that. Is there a lot of lifting?’

‘A fair amount I expect.’

‘And what if you’re not up for a lot of lifting?’ A croaky voice asked.

Peter looked around for the owner.

Chris leant against a pallet of beer and caught his breath. His heart had been beating hard and fast since the argument. ‘Some of us aren’t built like that.’

‘Or are about to fall down,’ Dianne joked, looking around for acknowledgement.

It was just a joke, a sentence that some heard as a premonition or insightful observation as Chris did begin to fall down or at least slide down the side of the pallet and into the arms of Karl and Brussel.

Peter continued without noticing, ‘Butchery will transfer directly to the McJimray’s butchery department but apart from that you all should be...’

Karl’s low voice talked over Peter, ‘Aw, help?’

Jade ran in from outside when she spotted her father’s collapse, followed hesitantly by Andy. The crowd soon encircled Chris instead of Peter just in time for the old man’s energy to flow back, but only to his mouth.

‘You think we’re just an army of slaves you can march off into battle? Who do you think you are? I suppose we’d all be working harder for the same money and you’ll be taking some incentive for this selfless act. You won’t be shipping me off!’ Chris ended his rant with a choking cough and was silenced by members of staff who initiated a move towards a seat.

Eddie called out, ‘Who’s our first aider?’

Maggie stared into the distance and swore out loud, then admitted, ‘It’s me.’

‘THE SINCERE
WORSHIPPER WHO
IS NOT STARTLED
INTO LETTING GO
HIS LADLE
AND CUP OF
SACRIFICIAL SPIRITS’

Peter drove his SUV north. It was a well-deserved morning away from the supermarket and there was not enough opportunity to get away. The meeting he decided to have on his way to Christchurch was just to introduce himself to potential buyers and if he was honest to brag about scoring the newest and most advanced supermarket in the South Island.

It would be a huge change. No more multitudes of students who buy one thing and cluster around the self-service machines. He would no longer have to pretend to relate to stocky and hardened farmers counting rain by the millimetre or the pigeon-toed farm girls with boots that smell like excrement dragging their feet through the store, or rich locals screwing him down on price just so they can drink themselves into oblivion and gossiping about other rich locals’ behaviour.

His mind was steadily removing these annoying side-effects of his current situation with the potential of the future: an international airport, a steady supply of tertiary students to draw on, working and middle class families in abundance,

a growing economy. It could not be better, despite having to move his own family for the third time in ten years.

He parked outside the Four Square and caught a conversation across the quiet stretch of the state highway.

‘I don’t know Brian,’ an older man said, in overalls suggesting he could have any trade or farming occupation. ‘These young ones don’t know what’s up and what’s down.’

‘That’s right.’ It was the familiar overly cheerful high pitch of the voice and laugh that had caught Peter’s ear. ‘And then this Globomart, uh.’

‘The young ones are all excited. All the world’s a supermarket to them.’

‘Nothing new is it?’

‘Just bigger.’

‘The Globomart? Doesn’t have a paint and flooring shop does it?’ The face turned serious, but it was only in jest. It was most certainly Brian Kitchener, the guest manager, the man who would be the face of McJimray’s Globomart for Aotearoa.

Peter gestured, but Brian looked through his transition lenses with a confused look on his face and carried on with the conversation with a more controlled tone. The owner of the Four Square welcomed Peter, but he was distracted by the man across the road. He excused himself in order to cross the road and caught Brian just as the other man was leaving in a hail of cheerful goodbyes.

‘They got you trawling the other regions as well?’ Peter asked trying to match the cheerfulness but was ignored.

Brian was about to walk past but took a look behind and realised he was being spoken to. ‘Sorry, I thought you must have been talking to someone else.’

‘It’s Peter Yearling. We met at the beginning of the week,’ he explained quickly so to not embarrass the man, but then noticed the embroidered writing on his jersey matched the building. ‘Brian...Kitchener?’

His face said yes, but instead he joked, ‘Maybe.’

‘Oh, I...’ Peter searched his mind for what to say, struggling to remain in the controlled, assertive mode he was used to. ‘Business good?’

‘Steady,’ he nodded. ‘Oh, you’re not from AWT are you? Their new guy?’

‘No.’

‘Not from the paper are you?’ He asked through his teeth.

‘No.’

‘Not the bank?’ He gasped and laughed it off.

The almost translucent hair on the man’s chin glistened in the morning sun; the lenses hid the pinhole eyes, but the smile came through tightening the furrowed brow while stretching his eyelids to the brink - it was all the nervous

expression of a man who had lost entirely any recognition of this person, or had never met him. He laughed once more but not with the soaring crescendo. Instead he laughed to excuse himself and carried on as he moved towards the entrance, saying, 'Sorry, must go,' in a garbled manner.

Peter was left on the pavement certain that every aspect of the man fit the person he had met, even down to the skin tone and receding hairline. He couldn't help but stare through the glass and notice his pensive walk and posture, the hands he held ready to gesture with every bold statement.

The Four Square owner called across the road, 'You just met the friendliest man in South Canterbury.'

Peter turned and called back, 'I did?'

'You did.'

'I nominated him myself.'

Peter could only swallow his laughter and shake it off. His mind came back to business and therefore erased the experience from short term memory. He would not think to resurrect his suspicions until he visited the Globomart himself.

'Change is good. Even a change of boss. But a new job, a new boss, always ends up the same way. There is no perfect manager. You always like them at first and then you grow to hate their authority. You relate and see them as a human because they've done something nice like give you a job and then you only see the way their decisions make life hard for you. My dad used to say it was the same with life on the road and managers, but maybe he was never cut out for work anyway,' Jade took a breath, her first in what felt like minutes.

Andy had summoned the will to video call her, doing so from the Stalker Hills farm, from the old house that he walked around while the boss and his son slaughtered a deer just outside the back door. It must have not showed that he was nervous and felt awkward talking in such a way.

Jade in comparison seemed calm, but detached. She had mentioned something about being at Brucie's but had been vague regarding how they were related. She had filled him in on getting used to the new workplace and how everyone was reacting to the daunting shift to McJimray's. She and the other workers had been inundated with technical information and forms. It showed that when there was a genuine impending event that gossip, whether exaggerated details or projected feelings, was less likely. They could all focus on the facts rather than what they thought was going on behind the scenes - excitement had taken over where paranoia often spread.

Andy stuck his head out the window and gauged how much longer he had from the state of the carcass. The son stood over the deer with blood up to his

forearms while the father sensed the eyes on them and looked up to the window. That stone face had once described how his bloodline could be followed all the way back to the Romans and how the family since those days had always been involved with war - it was a rehearsed speech with details of favourable pre-war business decisions which had haunted Andy.

‘So I’ll give you a quick tour once I’m out of this boring, old, fancy dining room with its carved oak chairs and mahogany table. The armoury behind me now with its locked gates, as you do when you do, and the grandest living room in the country perhaps. A hidden wonder of the South from pre-First World War times complete with original leather lounge suite, ornate woodwork, freezing cold atmosphere, and the biggest centrepiece over the mantel you have ever seen...’

‘Can’t see it,’ Jade replied.

Andy turned around and noticed the display had gone. ‘Oh, my mistake. When I was taken on this tour there was this display of weaponry on the wall with battle axes and shields, Middle-Eastern swords - and I’m talking medieval stuff - and not the fake stuff, but real weapons collected from real battles. Must have taken it down for cleaning.’

‘Great tour.’

‘I guess you have to see it with your own eyes.’

‘Or you have to be able to see it - can’t when it’s not there.’

‘Well, it’s not all about weapons.’ Andy sat on the ancient armchair. As cold as it was it was still amazingly comfortable. ‘It’s just coming from Auckland you don’t know that this stuff exists. I mean, there’s a hunting horn in the hall from the 1400s.’

‘A hunting horn?’

‘I know it’s a private collection and all, but it’s just sitting around gathering dust in someone’s occasional living room.’

‘And who’s the someone? Who’s the collector?’

‘Don’t know. It’s a trust thing. My boss, the guy looking after the place, this is his family’s homestead. He’s still farming. That there are people whose ancestors have traded in wool before and after great wars who’ve made millions and still look like any other farmer, it’s mind-blowing. Who have estates which are unused and in this condition. Who own thousand year old artefacts sitting on the wall...’

‘Or not on the wall?’

‘...and things I can’t even recognise because I don’t even know what I’m looking at. Either they respect it so much that they choose to keep it hidden away in this isolated station or they don’t even think about it and walk past it every

day as it gathers dusts - I can't work out what it is.'

'Anyway,' Jade urged him to change the subject. 'What brings an Aucklander down here/there? You still haven't told me about the tattoo and this Island Queen of yours.'

'Do you think I've got time?'

'Your ride is carving up a deer is he not?'

'Something like that.'

Jade looked at her phone. 'I've got...some time.'

'When I came back from overseas, I found that my family had moved on...as they often did, but this time without telling me. Well, maybe they tried but it seems sometimes with the ease of communicating that in contrast when people don't communicate it looks pretty cold and indifferent. I was guilty of that myself I guess, with friends and family - I didn't want to go back and I didn't want to look back, so I just looked forward, got some work, hung out with an old friend who I ended up pulling into my downward spiral. I thought that if you were unattached from things it was like they used to say "going with the flow" and that was better than holding on to things, monetary or emotional. I guess I was unattached from consequences for a while and my friend and I ended up offshore, floating around at the mercy of the ocean to avoid the consequences of our actions. Where my friend ended up I still don't know, but where I went brought me here...with a couple of stops along the way. I was picked up by a boat, part of a flotilla packed with medical and building supplies which was bound for a Pacific island chain hit hard in a recent storm - I don't remember the name because we never got there. They never meant to help anyone actually.'

'I have to be honest bro. I don't believe it. I tried to believe it. I followed my spirit guide around the world, but I grew out of it. I believed in coincidences and fate, I carried good luck charms and totems, I listened to omens. When do you listen to your actual body and your mind? When you're in pain, what's the point in all that shit? Does it make it easy to do this?'

I remember thinking the material things will weigh me down - I wanted the backpack to pull me under and hold me under just to prove myself right. But I was wrong. I had been so used to carrying such a heavy load I had forgotten there was an inflatable animal in the backpack. It gave me just enough belief that I'd be able to avoid going under that I stopped the panicking that would likely have been my end.

I didn't notice the boat as I was in another world. The Garbledark, a ship like any other at night cutting invisibly through waves - a shadow, a lost memory even, and by day a near-wreck, in need of paint and repair - came near and a

crew member who had been brought to the side of the boat for his own reasons had caught sight of me.

Brown had either been affected by one or both of the initial effects of heading out to sea with this crew again: seasickness being one of the expected effects and the other being Bodger packing the pipe for him. Either way Brown was vomiting off the side of the Garbledark when he spotted the backpack and a half-conscious person entangled in the straps.

They fished me out after turning the boat around and cruising past a couple of times. Bodger spotted me that time, clinging from a rope and yelling, 'Lucky your spew glows in the dark, Brownie.'

I was in no state to ask about Andre, in fact my first clear memory was Brown and Bodger discussing whether or not I had shat myself when I had died. For some reason I was around one side of a booth seat with a round table separating my nauseas daze from the uplifting chatter of the crew.

'It could have been me floating around like a lost buoy out there,' Brown said. He must have been in his forties with as rough a face and voice as he had.

Bodger who was not much younger, had the type of baby face and range of expression that only ever made him look innocent. Both were wearing Ab Origene warden jackets, but something made me think neither paid much attention to that identification.

Brown continued, 'Go easy on me. I need to build up the resistance you were obviously born with.'

Bodger looked at me still waiting for a reply from a comment I had hoped was just thrown offhand in my direction. 'That's alright. You can explain yourself when the captain's down.' His puffy eyelids closed over and reopened in Brown's direction. 'My bet is it was a plane crash.'

'Why would he have his backpack then?'

'Maybe he was blown out from the islands.'

'Is that it? Were you on the beach in the middle of a tropical storm on an inflatable - what was it?'

'A crocodile...or alligator, I don't know which.'

'But then why the backpack? Why? Answer when Satan speaks!'

Bodger let out a slow, high-pitched chuckle and nearly fell off his seat.

Another man entered the cabin and slapped Bodger on the arm before pouring a drink from a bottle hidden in a cabinet. 'Getting into it early aren't we?'

'The boys have to earn it,' Bodger said.

'I earned it just by being here,' Brown said.

'You got what you deserved from the look of it out there.' The man sat down

looking deadly serious and then turned to me. 'Now, why do I have an extra crew member all of a sudden?'

'This one's not much use. Can't even get a smile out of him.'

The man stood up and a shot of whisky appeared in front of my nose. The fumes filled me with the same dread I had been rescued from.

Brown stood up saying, 'I'll get it down him.'

I took the glass and forced it down before he could get into position.

'We've awoken the will. That's the first part. Let the whisky loosen your tongue.' The man looked like he lived in the t-shirt and shorts he had on. He spoke with more authority than the beach clothes suggested. 'I'm the captain, Francisco Da Silva.' He looked away as if to show he needed no recognition. 'You can call me Chico.'

Bodger and Brown had been waiting for it. One swore under his breath while the other laughed and protested, saying, 'Just like that - you can call me Chico. You didn't say I could call you Chico until our third voyage!'

'You're softening up!'

The captain put out his arms and then gestured at me. 'He could be dead overnight. Better to have been friendly to him while he was alive.'

'Oh, that's rough.'

I forced the words out as fast as I could. 'I'll be fine.'

'Hear that? He'll be fine.'

'It's not your health you should worry about,' Bodger said, staring me down with his stoned slits. 'It's the crew!'

'Ignore us,' Da Silva said pouring me another as I masked my disinterest in the alcohol. 'It's easy to be mean when we don't know who or what we're dealing with. Are you going to let us know what we're dealing with?'

I had my chance to introduce myself and explain how I got to where they found me. The younger crew members who had finished up outside soon joined the group. While the men in the front kept their poker faces on, the younger ones enjoyed the embarrassing story and unlikely excuse for being out to sea, including our stirring up of the gang compound and leaving home. The second I broke a smile Brown and Bodger started their own story, looking deathly serious.

Brown started in a low growl, describing how difficult it had been to shake the injustice when someone had pushed a car through his fence during his birthday party.

I looked for the exit and summoned some strength.

Bodger, putting a hand on Brown's shoulder as if to hold him down, almost became the nice guy in contrast. He offered some calming words, 'No, Brown. He didn't mean it. He was an innocent bystander.'

‘Didn’t mean it? You crushed my rose bushes!’ Brown tried to stand.

Bodger shook his head. ‘Those were heirloom roses.’

‘My precious heirlooms, you bastard!’

Da Silva couldn’t stop the laughter from spilling out behind his façade.

I wouldn’t admit that Brown had stopped my heart for a good thirty seconds. If they’d taken it a step further I would have jumped across the table and headed for the cabin door, taking my chances in the water.

Da Silva, still shaking his head, had to settle things, ‘We’re no gang, Andy. We’re the good guys.’

‘Yep, carrying aid for the islands.’

‘Heroes.’

They all carried on their laughter looking at each other with side glances and nods. I couldn’t shake the impulse to run away, but I would have to accept that now, of all the situations I had been in, there really could be no running away. I was locked up and at the mercy of this boat and crew. I focused on Da Silva, the strong, sincere captain, and trusted him that there was at least one person I should believe.

The next day I did what I could to help. I owed them my life so I was not about to ask questions regarding the lack of the so-called supplies they were supposed to be bringing to the islands. It seemed very functional, all the cleaning, moving things about, and quiet, serious conversations. Then at night the roars of laughter would grow louder and the talk turned to fishing, eating and women.

In a few days I had disappeared into the background completely. It didn’t matter if I was sitting back listening to who had overfished more than the next, or who had eaten the most food or slept with most women. I was surprised by Da Silva coming up to me as I sat out on the deck and handing me a bag with a tiny amount of cannabis, ‘Just keep that between you and me. You’ve deserved it.’

I thanked him and put it in a pocket immediately.

‘You’re in for the whole trip. We should get back in a little over two weeks. One stop, turn around and back home.’

I guessed he thought I was showing stereotypical signs of homesickness. ‘Oh, my thoughts aren’t on home. My parents are in a house-bus somewhere. Their house was bought out by some Ab Origene trust. That was all I knew of home - now, without a new resident’s passport, I can’t even return without being treated like a visitor.’

‘Wherever I am is home,’ Da Silva said as he sat and picked a spot on the horizon to stare at. ‘Oh, and a house-boat in Auckland makes a pretty good home. I can’t own, but... I can’t even own this, my ship. Ab Origene law.

Bodger and Brown technically own more of this than me.'

I had to check his face to see if it was another elaborate lie.

'I'm not joking. I don't get down about it. I'm lucky to be allowed to stay in a beautiful country, run my business and live as I wish. So what if I don't own any of it. Anyone who wants to be called by the Ab Origene label, they are welcome to it - owned by the mistruth that they are from the origin, from the beginning. From the origin of what? Which civilisation gave them the reasoning to create the label and condemn themselves to being so called original? Literally the only reason they started the Ab Origene movement is tax breaks for politicians and businessmen who needed a charity they could control.' Da Silva started waving his hands as his voice took on more anger.

'I thought it was to help with housing.'

'That's what they say, applying for the indigenous status means underprivileged families can afford houses...if they take loans from the fund. Controlling the ownership and controlling the wealth. Where do they get the houses? By forcing non-indigenous people out of theirs. Anybody living in a house too big for them, with too much land, near Ab Origene interests - out the door - all through rates and taxes.'

'Sounds pretty racist.'

'It sounds like a racist thing? Good, you think it's racist and it distracts you from all the money I'm making on the side. It is only rich people giving money while making more of it, not people being racist. Money rules the nation, not morals. That is why if you're still making money out of it you can still be happy, you still can win at the end of the day, but if you think winning is everybody being nice and understanding and equal, when we are governed by business-interested people in a popularity contest, then you will never be happy - not while racism is the first thing you see. Greed is the first thing I see, not inequality, not racism, not injustice.'

Da Silva didn't just lecture or debate, depending on who was around, he would make sure to turn the conversation over and make it about you. I had never had the spotlight on me the way he interrogated me when we were alone, as if he was writing a book on what made you you. He had a good grip on empathy, something he may have used a lot in the past to win people over. I only half noticed it when he wanted something done, he put the most effort in and while you were distracted with how nice he was he would then spring an order on you.

A good week into the voyage, when ship-shape and stronger on my feet, I was considered one of the crew by all accounts - most having forgotten that I wasn't drafted along with the rest of them - Da Silva caught me alone and

handed me another small bag. I felt a little distrusting, yet no order came.

‘In case you’re out,’ he said, attempting to breeze past without being noticed.

‘Oh no, I still have the other,’ I said, hearing the small child in me desperate to tell the authority figure how good he was. It felt awkward and I quickly thanked him in the hope it would clear his memory.

The captain stopped and stepped back towards me, saying, ‘Really?’ Thinking deeply, but keeping it to himself, he shrugged and rolled his eyes only to leave without expressing his thoughts.

In all the excitement of finally finding out where we were headed, with the island in sight and Da Silva, Brown and Bodger silent and on high alert as any sailor would be coming close to a reef, I found one of the other inexperienced ship-hands as unutilised as I and open for conversation.

‘Cruz, do you know this group of islands?’ I asked showing my anticipation.

‘Nah, I’m new to all this. AO work placement – my first one. Da Silva gets a lot of his crews from them apparently.’

‘I wonder if we’re all going ashore.’

‘Probably not, eh. Like to. Like to get off this boat for a while. Relax a bit. Not like I’m going to get a better chance.’

As if he was listening, Da Silva jumped and swung his way over to us, keeping one eye on the approach. ‘Boys, you may have noticed we’ve all the hands we need on deck so I’m going to have to ask you to...’

Brown, looking like a pirate behind the ship’s wheel, shouted something incomprehensible to the captain, something about the tide. Da Silva understood immediately and slapped us both on the arms.

‘OK, listen up boys. You and I are going to swim for it. Put anything you don’t want wet in here,’ he explained lifting the lid off a water-proof box on the deck. He saw the small bags he had given me, still with the same contents, as I through it inside. Again he slapped me on the arm, this time as if I had passed some kind of test. ‘Take the masks and snorkels, flippers and knives. Let’s go!’

Cruz and I fumbled with the straps as Da Silva forcibly manhandled them onto us. I had a moment while Cruz ran into trouble with his flippers and almost tripped himself up and off the side to look at the rugged island we had arrived near. There was no easy access and now it made sense that this was the only way. No one and no thing could be seen. With Da Silva as his most assertive yanking the knife attached to my waist to check that I had fixed it tight there was no opportunity to gather any details.

He fixed his own mask and snorkel at the last moment and then taking us both by the wrist took two large steps and threw himself and us over. My mask was full of water, snorkel too, followed by my mouth which sucked the saltwater

straight to the back of my throat, all while the cold crash had shocked my body back into that panic mode I had been in. I spat the snorkel out and coughed until the way was clear for air, fighting to keep my head over the waves while controlling the flippers.

Da Silva was already ten or so metres ahead. Even Cruz who was more uncoordinated than me from the outset had let the self-preservation instinct take over, splashing crazily on his way behind Da Silva. I held my breath and battled the waves to catch up, stopping every metre to take another breath and gauge my direction. Panic hit again as I saw Da Silva reach the rocks and the colour of his shorts and t-shirt disappeared from view.

I lost sight of Cruz also and headed for whatever rock I could find every so often feeling the graze of the jagged outcrops below on my flippers. I had to ignore the danger and power through with each surge changing my stroke so I wouldn't bash my hands into anything. One surge backward left me beached on a rock with handfuls of seaweed until the next wave pushed me off. The pattern of dropping and lifting was even enough to take the rocks in my hands and lift myself up, not without the pain of losing grip each time the waves washed over.

I was left hanging from the rocks until Da Silva found me and reached a hand down. It was just enough height to get my flipper over the top of a rock. I pushed myself up as much as Da Silva lifted me and paused to catch my breath, feeling the exhilaration of reaching land after so long.

Leading the way, Da Silva told us to keep quiet and follow him until they were under the cover of the trees. Only then did I notice the size of the knife that Da Silva wore, closer to a machete than what Cruz and I had. All I could see of the island was thick bush and a rocky coast. Questions were filling my mind considering how secretive we were being about our arrival.

We crouched by the treeline and Da Silva dropped his voice right down. 'Listen, the two of you have proven yourselves to be very trustworthy. I know that you would not want to break this trust by doing something foolish. There are people on this island, the Pickenesians, who would not want us here. We are going to come and go in one day and they will not know anything about it. Come.'

We followed him again as he dribbled the history of the island to us in between breaths and checks. Da Silva claimed the island was discovered by a Portuguese captain over five hundred years before on the search for Terra Australis. It was uninhabited but since then had been repopulated by various mutineers, sailors and drunks. Da Silva described them as inbred monsters with religious and ethical views out of the dark ages.

I could tell Cruz, along with me, was getting carried along by the story. We

had adrenalin overloads and leader who was strong in every aspect, walking a trail that sounded like it had been cut in for centuries. When we arrived at our destination I had almost decided that there was only one reason we would come this far and that was most definitely hidden treasure. Instead we stood at the perimeter of a cannabis plantation and I dropped any notion of treasure.

Da Silva stood over us judging our expressions and body language. His own body language suggested he owned us, Cruz because of his agreement with the work placement group and me because no one knew I was here.

‘Am I right in saying, you don’t want this? Cruz, you have drug testing when you get back. Andy, you don’t even see it for what others see it as. For me, this is my heritage and it is the only way I carry on this heritage.’ He let it sink in for only a moment and then turned to estimate the size of harvest. ‘We have to do this right, meaning I go back to the ship, we cruise to the sister island, the safer plantation, do what we need to do and then come back with enough guys to take this in one go.’

We nodded along prompted by Da Silva’s nods.

‘I need both of you to stand guard over this. Keep each other strong because it may be all day and we can’t have any distractions - discovering the rest of the island, disturbing the locals - you must stay here and not touch the plants. You understand? You hear noises, you hide. The sooner I get back to the ship to the sooner I get back here, so, I gotta go.’

He had suddenly become like an excited child. Perhaps he had not expected this plantation to still be here at all, at least not at the size that it was. He wouldn’t leave without a promise from both of us, even though it surely had not been a matter of trust, not when the alternate was starvation, imprisonment, perhaps even death. I wanted to clarify a few points that were startlingly obvious to me, but knew not to stop a man in such a state, not when he started hopping on the spot with anticipation.

Da Silva vanished, leaving a silent and frozen Cruz staring at the plants around him and myself, unable to stop from panicking. I took a step towards Cruz to try and get eye contact but he refused. ‘This is uncomfortable. I don’t know where we are. There could be a village with cannibals just over the hill. Do you think we should go back?’ I laughed to try and disguise the anxiety as I continued, ‘Do you think we could ask to go back and then someone else could guard the stuff?’

Cruz didn’t seem to be the type to express his anxiety. He murmured his thoughts but only because I was setting a bad example. A turn of the head said he was trying to ignore me along with the situation he was in.

I hyperventilated for a minute, sat down on a bank and leaned against the

cool soil with my eyes closed. When I came out of my trance I was nodding. I took a deep breath as my sweating stopped and the breeze rushed over me. Then I laughed to myself. 'I used to write in a travel diary.'

Cruz shook his head. 'What?'

It felt like a confession. 'I used to write in a travel diary. Course I had to travel alone a lot of the time - my friends were more interested in the drinking part of travel, whatever that was exactly, because it sure wasn't celebrating - so I wrote in a travel diary because...I had this time. It was a habit I got from my mother. I did it because at the moment something is happening it's the details you're likely to forget. Most people forget the details almost on purpose or out of habit I guess, or they don't write them down on purpose. My habit was writing them down and now I wonder why I wanted to remember all the detail - what about the next significant moment that you are ignoring while you stop and think and write, y'know? And if the bulk of people live quite happily letting things go, why should I bother holding onto everything? If I read back on the stuff I wrote, there would be maybe a page every now and then that surprised me - oh, I forgot that, that was good to remember, or that was interesting - and the rest I wanted to throw away. Just like anyone else, I wanted to forget the moaning, the times that were frustrating and exceptionally difficult, yet I wrote it all down and there it was alongside all the good stuff. I kept those details yet I didn't keep my friends? Maybe I didn't respect people enough - I respected details, boring, mundane details, but I didn't respect people. It was probably the whole religion thing - if you take it too seriously you know you judge people harshly. It's hard to avoid because you have all these expectations spelled out for you and repeated every Sunday and then every morning before school - you should be this, you should be that. I just wish people tried to be good just out of compassion or something like that.'

Cruz had taken his knife out of its sheath and was turning it over and over.

I carried on, 'I trusted Da Silva. He's a good captain, a good teacher. A good swimmer.'

Cruz ignored what I was saying, turned his back and walked off, saying, 'I'm not even listening bro. I'm going to collect some shellfish.'

'You liked him,' Jade said. 'You can say it. It doesn't sound gay or anything.'

'I liked him,' I agreed.

'So when do I hear about this Island Queen?'

'What?' He grunted getting the idea that she thought it was a love story he was telling.

Jade was distracted by something outside of the camera's view. She

apologised and walked out of shot, giving Andy a moment to check his emails. It was something he did so rarely and he found pages of new emails to scan through. A feeling of dread came over him as he opened an email from Rosana with “Please, please reply quickly” written in capitals and dated back a few months.

“If you have seen or heard from Andre please let me know. We have to pass on any information we have to the police. They are investigating some poor girl who died down our street. I don’t think it has anything to do with either of you, but some funny stuff did happen that night, eh. Do you remember hitting anything that night? Apart from Stan’s car I mean.”

Andy sat staring blankly like a statue until he remembered to breathe. He shook his head knowing the answer was obviously no but then went over the details in his head, murmuring, ‘Details, details.’

‘I’m back,’ Jade yelled at full volume. The video was hidden behind another window but the sound of a male’s voice suggested she had a visitor.

Andy stared at the email, going over the wording as if it wasn’t clear from the first read. ‘Hi, I’ll be with you in just a second.’

Graham introduced himself presuming he could be seen and heard, and launched into a series of questions, none of which Andy heard clearly. Andy had to clear his mind of the email and focus back on this unexpected visitor.

‘What was that?’

‘Oh nothing, just wondering if you got paid in venison out there?’

‘Oh, yeah. Thankfully no.’ Andy smiled to break the confused expression on his face. It seemed from the way they play-fought over the camera that they had known each other for some time and he felt immediately like the odd one out.

‘Please continue with the story,’ Jade said before thinking, turned to Graham and asked, ‘That’s if we have enough time.’

Graham paused for a moment and looked from Jade to the screen and back again. ‘Of course. I love stories. I’ll pick it up whatever the story is. Tell away,’ he commanded, settling in next to Jade with an arm around her neck.

Andy switched their video off and looked up where the centrepiece had been on the wall in front of him. In his mind the weapons flashed, appearing unlike the plastic toys he grew up with, glistening despite their wear almost like mirrors particularly the flat curved blade of the missing scimitar - yet, they had still seemed like an assortment of toys. He could see them vividly and dismissed the question as to why the centrepiece was removed considering the weapons were hardly in need of a clean. The thought of those weapons took him back to that moment, their inherent warning of pain and disfigurement, the respect that they demand, spurring his desire to embellish the story.

‘They came at us from all around, each one armed with a different style of weaponry, from garden tools to large knives and one of them toting a gun as if it was a spear. The gun itself could have been two hundred years old or more - I didn’t see it as real or as threatening as the knives that were waved in our faces and used to shepherd us away from the plantation. They made a big spectacle out of cutting it down in front of us, putting the blades to good use. I felt no anger or frustration for the loss obviously, it was nothing to us personally. A small part of me felt bad for the captain - he had seemed so excited by his plan coming together.’

Graham’s low voice cut in, gasping in his own way. ‘What’s going on? What did I miss?’ Jade told him to shut up and urged Andy to continue.

Cruz had been using the small knife to open shellfish at the water’s edge. They had had no problem relieving him of his weapon and forcing him to show them who else was on the island. The range of faces, wrinkled and smooth, each one an obvious mix of Polynesian and European in almost equal amounts, suggested a good chunk of the male working force had found us and they were not pleased about it.

They searched for our boat and found nothing, then led us along the coast to the village. It was on the way that one of the more odd villagers took an interest in my necklace. He didn’t make much sense, speaking in heavy Pidgin English. It was my only personal possession and I had no way of showing that he wasn’t going to take it without a fight.

We were put in the prefab box that was their jail until there had been time for deliberation. During that time of course we knew we were guilty for whatever type of crime they imprisoned us over, and knew full well what type of punishment would be the likeliest, given we were involved in the trafficking of drugs.

So it was a time for introspection, something Cruz was not very familiar with. I had always found that a little reflection helped to put things in order, particularly if I had to come to terms with the fact that I had done wrong and that I was going to be severely punished. It didn’t help that I was certain of this, having my own conviction, where as in his mind Cruz was still waiting on rescue from the others. I think he was looking out the window the whole time watching for a boat, thinking that after some peaceful agreement with the locals we would just walk right away.

‘I haven’t done anything wrong. I shouldn’t be punished. It’s not my fault I’m here. I’ve got a missus and a baby.’ This was the tenth time at least I had heard the same reasoning, and the fear: ‘I don’t want to be eaten.’

I kept quiet having exhausted the ways I could explain that we had done everything wrong in their eyes, and their eyes were all that mattered. I had to accept that myself finally when the crowd came to the door and unlocked it with a lot of talk and noise. I swallowed hard and prepared for the worst.

The door swung open and the first face we see isn't stern, but sweet and smiling, almost to the point of looking like a cartoon. In fact the rest of the crowd seems to be placid and most are trying to smile also.

The first woman spoke after clearing her throat in as close to proper English as was possible, still with an overbearing sweetness. 'Sorry about that. Welcome to Pickens Island. Come on out and say hello.'

Cruz and I were hugged and kissed, had our hands shaken by just about every man on the island, treated to songs and food, and then shown around the village, a much more vast area and development than we first thought. The grass and gardens were tended, the houses looked welcoming. I didn't know about Cruz but the thought of escape seemed so close, yet so unnecessary.

Closer to the coast a ramp disappeared into the waves and at the top of the ramp were sheds for storing their longboats. With the abundance of elderly people around it was hard to believe they could operate these vessels. Ruth, our tour guide, did not seem new to the concept of showing people around, presenting the village to us as if we were tourists, and it might have been my imagination but it seemed to be her who provided the level-headed reasoning the others lacked and may have been responsible for this turn in events. Still, after she brought us full circle we feared we were about to be led back into the jail. I kept one eye on the longboat sheds as I'm sure did Cruz.

'And that is our jail. We don't use it much, thankfully.'

A branch was all that held the latch closed. Apparently they really didn't have any real aggressive criminals that needed to be really locked up.

I had it in my head that I needed to ask, 'What if there is a disagreement and two people start to fight over something,' mainly because the slightly odd-looking man who pestered me about my necklace crept up behind Ruth.

'Then we work it out another way.'

She leapt as the man who was lacking a good amount of teeth simultaneously surprised her and pulled the necklace, breaking the worn string.

'William!' She called as he walked away quickly, silently studying the prized item he had found. 'Don't worry about him - he spends too much time with the bees. It's true what they say: fish should not be taken from the deep; they are ugly and scary-looking. We'll get it back to you before the next ship.' This is when she stared at both of us as if she'd finally come out of her welcoming trance and into reality. 'The men say you were eating shellfish up the coast and

that one of you was found next to a lot of forbidden plants.' Again she checked our eyes and waiting for verification. 'We have an elder visiting the spot where you were found. There is disagreement over these plants. William says they are good for the bees - he would know - but elders say it brings bad-minded people.'

We followed Ruth over to a shack where she found an old man lying naked on a woven blanket. They seemed to argue in pidgin for some time until he finally got up and went to put some clothes on.

'He will visit the spot where you were found,' Ruth explained to us as the man pushed past her rudely and looking us up and down. 'And tell us if they are good plants or bad plants.'

The elder pulled a cap over his balding head and tramped over the grass losing his sandals in the process, saying, 'Trees and plants, in their early growth, are soft and brittle; at their death, dry and withered.'

Ruth answered him. 'Old man who like to sunbathe naked, no matter how dry and withered, only seems to live forever.'

I tried to laugh even though I found it hard to believe this was the man who was going to investigate our innocence.

Ruth broke her smile and lowered her voice, 'It is the belief of the men that you come to take the plants - which is also forbidden - but there was no ship. There was no tents. And you have no bags. So, you must have fallen overboard and arrived here by accident.' Now the smile had returned and she nodded over and over until we agreed with her. Looking at me she said, 'I know because your skin - it would be white, but it's very sunburned.' Then to Cruz, 'Your skin, I can't tell.'

As far as I was concerned, the people of the island, the Pickenesians and us were all the same colour - sun-dried, almost baked, which seemed to look healthy to me. During that first long day I witnessed the men hunting in rocks for bait, dressed as if they had just walked out of a shopping mall. Their culture was what you would expect from a very small community in an isolated place, laidback, familiar with each other and understandably uncertain about us, yet it tested me to think that a people could be both Polynesian and European. It tested Cruz also, but he was quick to put them in a category of their own, that being inbreeds. He was still looking for a way out.

The children were in school, the men pushed longboats down the ramp and went off fishing, and women sat around weaving or otherwise making themselves useful - to me, this wasn't a village of inbreeds. When the kids were let out of school and came running around Cruz it was clear he had had enough of their reality. He chose to sit in the jail waving it all away like he had had too much sun and ignored them as they threw stones at the window. I was pulled this

way and that in order to see this or do that at their behest. The strongest child winning until another cut in.

One boy wanted me all to himself so he could practice his near perfect English. I knew he was generally uninterested in the answers, but asked where I came from. I replied, 'I had a place, but they changed the name and they changed the definition of who was from there, so now I don't have a place.'

'Where do you live?' The boy asked with a confused tone.

'I used to live in South Auckland. I left and then my parents were forced out of their home as part of the AO housing initiative. Now I think everyone is kind of happier anyway. South Auckland was never really a home.'

'I stay over there.'

I nodded, I really could not tell the houses one from the other.

Another asked, 'Where do you stay?'

'Here, I guess. Somewhere here. I don't know.'

'How do you not know? You answer questions funny. You stay here, but where.'

'I could stay here. I really don't know. I'd like to stay here.'

The boy smiled. 'You want to stay here? No one like you stays here long.'

'Maybe I could be the first. I don't have anywhere to return to.'

'Why not?' He asked, eyes unfocused. I was starting to think this may have been William's son.

'OK, I'll answer this and then I have to go.' I crouched down and spoke at his level. 'Sometimes when little villages get bigger they turn into things called civilisations. Then things that were important aren't important anymore and everyone gets told what to do and how to dress no matter how different you are. They tell you that you can't catch bait in the rocks anymore or go out fishing, they tell you that you can't lie in the sun naked or go the school that you want to go to, because when you live in a civilisation you are a number, you're not expected to grow or be yourself, and if do then you feel bad because you're not doing what everyone else is doing.'

'Where you got to go?'

I sighed and spotted William walking out of the bush. 'I've got to talk to William. You know William don't you? I think I see a family resemblance.'

'William? He's a stupid man. He always looks ugly.'

The boy ran away as Ruth walked over and told him off with a hiss.

'Sometimes they get some words wrong, the little ones. Ugly in Pickern is the same word for angry...like your friend at the moment.'

'Cruz? Ugly? Oh, angry? In the jail? For the record, he's not my...'

'Oh, and the elder came back from the spot where they found you. No

forbidden plants, no crime. Sometimes the men, they see things. Eh, but I know you have a good set of eyes - you can help us. Cruz has made his choice. I see so have you.'

When we got to the office, William, who leant against the wall admiring the necklace, became rattled and forced his way out past the two of us and back the way he came out of the bush. I tried to explain that now would have been a good time to get the necklace back but Ruth was busy explaining how those who are good at using the computer were very lazy and those that were bad at it were the ones that needed it the most.

'Sometimes we have to make business decisions while the rest do what they are good at - fishing and weaving, elders do their thing - in order to keep the flow of goods coming, sometimes we have to do things in secret so that only those who need to know, know. My mother said to me: those who know do not talk; those who talk do not know. That's why nobody who don't talk, knows nothing. So we gotta send this email about the Island Queen now - we can't use her real name over email, so we gotta call her Island Queen and you gotta make email say we ready to transport her highness, and we need safe transport for one passenger on next available ship.'

'You're going to meet the princess aren't you?' Jade presumed, both excited for Andy and jealous of the Island Queen's importance. 'Why so secret?'

Graham was equally fascinated. 'Yeah, why so secret? Where is this princess now?'

'Shhh, he can't skip ahead.'

Andy shuffled in the centuries-old couch, oak creaks echoing through the microphone, and paused while he listened for someone else's movement. 'I need to be quick - I think they're starting to make a move out there.'

'Forget them. Love is too important.'

Andy contorted his face and sighed.

Over the next few days I was treated as one of the villagers. People got used to me fast - I guess I learnt to adapt to my own type of homelessness - and things were pretty relaxed despite the fact that Cruz continued to confine himself to the jail in the hope of being rescued. I had to ignore his effect on the villagers who kept asking if he was sick, but I stopped myself each time when I was about to say that he was just homesick - it seemed like it would cause more attention than was necessary. He just needed time.

They took me out on the fishing boats although I was not much help. By that stage my vegetarianism had all but worn off. The men on the Garbledark had

insisted a working man should eat meat just as they insisted I eat more meat than was necessary to make up for my deficit. The power of fitting in had never been such a strong effect. Now after the fishing trips it was even more a rite of passage - something I had chosen to ignore about my own world when I had a life I could control. It had been a pleasant experience, despite the initial bruising to my will, particularly as the men and the women in turn took me through the cleaning and the cooking of the fish just as my father and mother had done in my youth.

Yeah, all of this I have to admit was like being in a community - so much sitting or standing around talking, joking and sharing basic information - like I had never known. However by the fourth night as I had encountered the closest thing to a local party, an event where one of the teenagers was about to receive the first of many episodes of painful tattooing, I was wishing I had chosen the same as Cruz. I was losing myself or what was left of me in the gravity of this culture and I could not believe they wanted to turn their blades on me after such a short initiation.

It was not my imagination, but a feeling I sensed from the women and elders that this was the men having too much fun. By the end of it, as much as I was reason to laugh in the men's eyes, I was even more a part of the community with the tell-tale limp of the initiate. I avoided going out on the boats while my thigh recovered, taking time to air the outline of what was going to be an exponentially more painful tattoo.

When I caught sight of William this time I used it as a way to take my mind off the pain and followed him with my only intention to corner him and take back my possession. He was not alone in his shed. I could see through the door that there was an elder. This man seemed to be in the middle of a prayer and had in his hands my necklace. William waited like a child would wait for his parents after a church meeting, with reverent control over his voice but with body language that screamed "That's enough, hurry up!"

William had brought with him a tiny object, possibly a pin or needle, and took the necklace just as the elder finished then pushed the pin into the side of the little wooden box. To me it was vandalism and I could not help myself from protesting.

'William, stop that!'

At first the two of them stared at me hiding their surprise behind muffled Pickern, then the odd beekeeper stepped towards me with the necklace raised as if to present it to me. The elder said something and William took off back down the path.

I hobbled after him, explaining, 'That was given to me by a family member.'

It is antique and it is mine.' I was not keeping up very well with William. Even the elder could match my speed.

He asked me, 'What is yours?'

'That thing. The necklace.'

'Is it your possession?'

'Yes, that's what I'm saying.'

'And it cannot be possessed by anyone else?'

'Not while I want it,' I answered without thinking.

'Then it is not strictly anybody's.'

'What kind of a thing is that to say? Of course it is.'

The elder stopped me, taking me by the arm and shaking me.

'Do you think I was born into this? I was not. I chose this place a long, long time ago, and I had to learn this peasant wisdom as if it was the greatest wisdom known to mankind. But I chose it because it didn't result in mass slaughter or oppression. Do you feel oppressed because you have to wait to get your necklace back? Because I can tell you there are worse things in this world.'

I could only stutter as I had little time to speak before sounds from the village distracted us.

The elder relaxed his grip and concluded, 'I found the plantation. I left it as it was in the hope the others would collect it and leave. You are not innocent, but you are not strictly guilty. The truths about ourselves are continuous, not fixed, so it is not up to me to judge and label them. I can tell it was not your plantation. You do not seem to be strictly anything. You seem to be floating...and maybe this is good for you.'

A crack could be heard echoing in the distance. The elder seemed to know exactly what it was, but I was not making any sense of it.

'The men who came for the plants - are they the same as you?'

'Same as me? What...?'

'Don't be so naive. You have not learnt aggression. These other men, I'm thinking they have.'

By the time we returned to the village more bangs and cracks shot out. Shouts from both sides suggested our shipmates had made some kind of rescue. The elder jumped into the bush just as we came out into the clearing, only when he had confirmed the aggressors were closer than he thought. Cruz had either burst out of the jail or was pulled out by the crew. I could see Bodger and Brown leading the way back to safer ground.

I was spotted by Da Silva who was far over the other side of the harbour keeping the villagers on the defence. The sight of the captain with a gun in his hands made me want to follow the elder into the bush. Da Silva waved and

called. Even his pausing was aggressive. Too impatient to wait, he followed the treeline around to me and I panicked to find a solution to my predicament.

‘Let’s go!’ Da Silva yelled as he closed in, angry that I had not moved. He became angrier still when I remained immobile, calling me by the wrong name and pulling on my shirt.

When he finally remembered my name and tried to change his tone it was to his disadvantage. It was a concentrated pause which left him open to a surprise attack by a frenzied William who leapt on him with such force that he had to throw his gun to stop from landing on it. What seemed like a crowd of village women followed William, falling out of the bush in an avalanche of high-pitched intimidation.

They were uninterested in immobilising the man. It was a show of numbers at a time when Da Silva had gone out on a limb to rescue me and left himself without cover. I barely had the time or timing to apologise - whatever words were heard could not placate his confused frustration.

‘We came for you! What are you doing?’

‘I’m staying.’

William had the gun pointing at the ground. The women had all sorts of bizarre objects in their hands, most of the type you still wouldn’t want pushed in your face or thrown at you. It never felt so right to make a stand against an authority figure, especially one that had it fixed in his head that I was his property. Really, the villagers were saving me and all Da Silva could think was how to walk through the odd-looking mob and take back his find.

‘You should go,’ I said. ‘Or someone will get hurt.’

In the distance Cruz was leaping clumsily over rocks and onto dirt banks as if there was a hail of bullets heading in his direction. With Brown and Bodger yelling and also leaping in a forced panic there was no wonder. Da Silva made his difficult decision and backed off, just before Bodger realised where the captain was and fired a warning shot in our direction.

Da Silva yelled at him to stop and took his time in retreating. It didn’t seem like he explained what had happened. I couldn’t explain it myself. I had made held my ground and my ground was a tiny community on an isolated island in the Pacific ocean, one that made no small thing of celebrating the success of protecting one of their own.

The Pickenesians put together a feast of fruit and bread while some of us sat around the perimeter of the meeting hall and waited for the scouts to check that the enemy had left. There was a while, left to reflect on the fear in the back of my mind, when I felt I had not made the right decision, with a kind of sinking, even a stabbing feeling that there a chance to still leave the island if I ran now. It

was a feeling that the Garbledark would take me home, even though the men would probably never let me return.

Even though the villagers didn't say it, in the absence of a place to call home it was almost certain that this was as good as any place. After the feast and with William and a few others celebrated as heroes in a series of laughter-filled speeches, I attempted to thank these people also and my words were laughed off almost entirely. William wouldn't look me in the eye being the shyest of a seemingly shy group of people.

'No, I'm serious,' I tried to save my speech as Ruth stood up and walked away. 'It is unusual to find a community that bands together in such a way, one that has equal recognition for effort, and where competition, greed, gluttony and pride are not things which stand in the way. I think it's obvious that I like it here and that I would like to stay...'

'And marry a local girl,' someone joked.

'And increase the population,' another said.

A weathered older woman put her arm around my neck and planted a kiss on my cheek. The crowd, sitting and standing, were crying with laughter. Despite their making light of the idea, I had to admit that behind my words there was this desire to do just that.

Ruth entered the hall and had in her hands the necklace. It was suddenly all about the conferring of this great possession of mine, like some significant moment that would bring us men together and start things off for me in the community on an even footing. She brought it down over my head and told everyone to be quiet.

Looking at me as if she understood exactly what I needed and said, 'The Island Queen.'

There words, 'marry a local girl', 'increase the population' echoed in my head. It was my first thought when Ruth mentioned the Island Queen. The elder sat down next to me and cleared his throat while I sat in confusion taking peeks at the door as if someone resembling an island queen was going to enter.

He looked around and then back to me. 'Those that came before and settled this island, what happened to them happened because they had little other choice - ridicule, anger, abuse, and lack of compassion and understanding. This led to an uprising which changed the fate of these souls you see around you. It was said of the island and this is what I thought about it when I visited that there was "neither wealth nor want" - I'm telling you that there is, there has to be, in order protect and maintain the community. No one likes telling other people what to do - it's not our thing. I mean, I have to with William - we all know that - his interest in the production of honey outweighs his knowledge and common sense,

but he follows instructions well, he is useful. He recognised the box you carry was intended to transport a queen bee to a new hive and saw this as a sign. Our island is pest and disease free, we have the healthiest bee stock in the pacific and smuggling this into your country will replenish stocks for a whole season and benefit your own country too, whatever they call it. This makes you useful.'

I deliberated in an almost delirious state of mind. 'You want me to be a mule? A smuggler? I can be useful in other ways.' Nothing came to mind.

Ruth just stood back and shook her head, but only to disagree entirely with anything I said. She had dictated the emails that I sent on their behalf, this innocent society with neither wealth nor want, and my thanks was to return home.

'You will be a hero, Andy,' the elder corrected. 'Do you not think this is an apt title?'

'Well that sure beats my last holiday,' Graham said, reminding Jade that it was time to leave.

To Andy it sounded like a regularly lovers' quarrel, the type that were very hard to listen to without butting in and pushing them back into their own corners - harder to listen to when he had just intimately shared his exploits.

Jade raised her voice so Andy could hear just as Andy turned the video back on. 'We should talk again soon. I'm sorry to hear that your Island Queen was... not.' She struggled to continue with Graham standing over her, poking her in random spots. 'I promised Graham and his father dinner, but Brucie has declined, a loyal local to the end who cannot stomach even the idea of Thai food, so...'

'It's just us,' Graham finished. 'His and your stubbornness is my gain. Someone to nurse my broken heart with.' He pulled her hand up to his chest and lifted her up in the process then bent down and stared into the camera. 'Bye bye beekeeper.'

'I would invite you, but you're in the middle of nowhere, aren't you?'

Andy thanked her and said goodbye, wishing them a good night with an insincere smile. He tried to read her expression as she searched for a way to disconnect the call, hoping that some of that indifference was a result of having to eat out with her ex-boyfriend.

He was caught staring into space by Martin Ryder, his employer, who had silently entered the lounge and propped himself up with the back of the armchair, his light-footedness an impressive feat for a man on a crutch.

'I haven't interrupted, have I?' Martin asked with a tone so deep and clear that it was devoid of remorse or recognisable empathy.

Even the fact that Andy hesitated in his response could be reason for the older man to get impatient. Andy knew this but resisted looking into his eyes. There was something odd about that fact that he had taken the energy to creep up and give Andy his own time to sit and think or finish the conversation. He could have yelled up the hall, even a grunt would have roused him.

A week, or two, he couldn't remember, at the mercy of that crew who fed him on meat and whiskey, then forced to scramble up rocks and stand guard over a plantations just to be brought back as a mule. These days he had to consciously control a seething panic and rage which boiled down and was rendered into something so much more potent.

Andy, lost in his thoughts as if playing dead, finally turned his head and tried to make eye contact in the dim light. Somewhere in the swollen lids there was a cutting stare that studied every movement and intercepted every wilful impulse. Martin's sons knew not to take their time in answering - they all showed just about as much emotion as the leather cushion Andy sat on. Each knowing the other at their best and worst, there was a stand-off as if whoever had the weakest will would speak first and expose their frustration.

Martin had kept Andy waiting, and merely so his son could slaughter a deer - it must have been playing on his mind, yet Andy knew there would be no apology. Their leisure was of no interest, no source of frustration to Andy. He kept the feeling at bay, that this current guardian returned him home so late each night he had no time for himself.

No one would understand with each shift, with each adaptation, how much Andy had lost of himself. Another layer stripped back when the Pickenesians used him in the same way as the smugglers and sent him back in worse conditions than the Garbledark. They had taken his beliefs away, in vegetarianism, humanity and in himself, and brought him back to the same office where he had suffered his greatest loss, that of his homeland.

In that office, Anita had greeted him as a relative, despite the darker face with even fewer possessions and returning with the same idealistic ignorance. She had said, 'The prodigal son returns,' and it made his stomach seize. She then asked if there was any family member that could pick him up.

No one knows, echoed hauntingly as if around the room, but only in Andy's mind. The full force of isolation, a dissociation with his surroundings was in effect and had been building for weeks. From that office to this cold manor house there was no difference - he had not taken a step as a free man since he left this country - and so he remained frozen, a statue in the memory of broken will.

It was Anita who had received the emails from Pickens Island. The breast-

feeding Madonna turned underground mafia and explained to Andy that he was further from his citizenship than ever. He had only one choice and that was to take the pity of the Stalker Hills Trust. As if he wasn't already aware, they would be the recipients of the Island Queen and keep her and him safe from detection.

Martin Ryder the last of another wise generation of a family that traced its noteworthy origins back to the Roman conquest of Britain, suffered the necessary side-effects of a three day fast and stood motionless while his stomach raged inside of him, crackling like lightning.

Andy didn't want politeness, he didn't want to be right or respected, or anything else the old man thought he wanted. If he had to put it into words, the only thing he needed was control again over his thoughts and actions again, but in this stalemate the only thing that would be put into words was his next order. Andy could tell when Martin wanted something new from him.

'I'll be needing your help this Saturday. I have a special delivery to make of a very special and private nature. I can't tell you more except that we'll be taking it to the ship that's arrived in Oamaru.'

'The Globomart?'

'Yes. Look, Andy, I have appreciated your help, I want you to know that. I want you to treat this with the same professionalism you have shown in all our dealings, particularly those of the Peoples' Republic. The PRNZ has always considered you a hero for services to the production of honey and the economy of the South Island. When this delivery is complete, I want you to consider your contract with us also complete.'

Andy could not help showing his sincerest relief. The gratitude he felt overwhelmed him. 'Will I still have to look after the hives?'

'Only if you want to. Think about it - there is plenty of time for a decision.'

A decision, Andy thought, the only decisions he had made lately were in a negative sense, limiting his curiosity, numbing his senses and reserving his feelings, keeping himself at a distance. It was as if Martin had opened the door for him and he could feel a flood of potential rushing in.

'Thank you. Do you need a hand getting the stock ready?' Andy asked, humming on the inside and ignoring the possibility that Martin would feel like he was losing an important member of the team, even a member of the family.

'No. Not with this one.'

Martin left the room with the sound of keys jingling and a gate unlocking as he hobbled down the corridor, leaving Andy to finish his business in silent, controlled celebration. He accidentally clicked on the junk email folder while his mind flew to his future.

He laid eyes on a particular new address and quickly moved it to his inbox to

read it, saying out loud, 'You're kidding me.'

The booming voice returned, calling, 'Are you coming, or not?'

Andy shut down the laptop and paused to stare at the empty wall once more.

GO ALONG

Layne came to the door dressed in black, his usual at-home style and not a huge departure from the work uniform. He wasn't surprised to see Jade there, having checked who it was from the lounge window. He had given Chris a minute to open the curtains and windows presuming that she'd want to see him. After speedy greetings, Layne led her to the lounge to find he had not moved off the couch.

The pot-bellied man moved about on the spot - he knew about depression, having claimed to be in its clutches most months, so he knew to avoid calling him out harshly on his inability to care. Instead, Layne left the two of them alone and went out to the garden, making sure to open at least one set of curtains to let some light in.

The light did pour in and Chris screwed up his face and rearranged himself so he could avoid it.

Jade started out by sitting and musing as if Chris wasn't there. 'If there's one thing that jumps out at you after coming back home, it's the fact that people really do care around here. They really do listen, and remember details, and talk and talk and talk about things with any and everyone, but still they really do seem to care. I was surprised by Tim - I don't know him well, but he's a really nice guy inside an annoying teenager's body - because he told me he was worried when you had told him that you were John Benjamin. Seemed random at the time even for a teenager working in a supermarket who encounters new and weird people almost every day and doesn't even know it. Now why would you claim to be someone you're not, even if you made a living off of it once upon a time?'

Chris continued to look away. He stared instead at Layne's brand new guitar, something he had bought for himself a year ago and had barely even taken off the stand in that time.

'There was some worry that you were losing it. People thought you were

older than you are, because my father whose absence I mourned a long time ago, wasn't incredibly old. Still, you could be losing your marbles. You don't seem to recognise people you've known for some time. Am I wrong in thinking that a father would want to tell his daughter how his health was going, particularly after passing out pretty dramatically at work?

'You're not wrong,' Chris turned his head and said. 'You're not wrong at all. I am. I was very wrong to have done what I...'

'What have you done?'

'I didn't know you existed. I presumed the guy had nothing. I acted rashly but not so rash that I didn't think it through. I buried the rockstar and took your father's name, but I took more than that. If I could get out of the house, I wouldn't just have to face running into you or anybody else who knew about your mother, I would...'

'What do you mean you can't get out of the house?' Jade asked, the lump rising in her throat almost taking her voice away.

'I took your father's debt. The bastard down the driveway knows about it. They don't ever seem to go off to work and I'm not taking another beating just for a stroll.'

Jade was only half listening. It was final, the man she came to visit was not her father. She looked at him like a ghost, staring past his indignant expression. 'Can you promise me you'll stop using his name?'

'I don't know if that will help.'

'It will help me.' Her glassy eyes blinked uncontrollably, a signal John Benjamin couldn't ignore.

'I'm sorry you had to find out this way.'

'No, no, I'm OK. Part of me knew. I've just been kind of used to living in an illusion. Something about it seemed familiar. You're still a human being after all.'

'Just.'

'Fallible, I mean.'

'Oh, yes.'

'You are a human being, aren't you?'

'Very much so.'

'Sorry to hear about your problem with the locals.'

'I guess I deserved it - telling a lie. I hope I haven't dug up raw feelings about your mother by my actions.'

Jade shook and nodded her head, eyes searching for anything but more contact. 'Oh no, I haven't just heard that my father passed away without either of us knowing. What's my mother got to do with it?'

John paused, wondering if she was blinded by emotion. 'Her tragic death.'

She fidgeted and fumbled with words until coming to her decision. 'I...may have spread a bit of a rumour - a lie I guess. My mother's not dead. She lives in a crib up the coast, quite happily, working in a nursery from time to time.'

'She's a nurse?'

'A tree nursery.'

'She's alive?'

'That would be correct.'

He couldn't help nodding over and over, generating enough heat he had to stand to shake it off. The relief of losing half of his guilt was taken over by anger and an overwhelming dizziness from standing.

Jade, angry herself, overreacted, 'I hope you're not judging me for my actions, because you're certainly not one to start judging. I said you're a human being - I'm saying I'm sure you had your reasons, but that doesn't mean you can make me feel bad.'

'I'm not trying to make you feel bad. It's just not how I saw my retirement.'

Jade shook her head and stood up, coldly saying, 'You saw a doctor, I presume - I hope everything is ship-shape.'

'No,' he croaked, looking at the closed curtains. 'No, it's not. I had a house call - the doctor wasn't expecting to find an elderly man in the north end of Oamaru with nanobots in his blood, a man who counted his age in decades because he can't remember silly details like that. Transfusions come with a high price tag and they also have a lifespan. While I find myself feeling my age the doctor suggests I may have a few more decades in me. As a result, I'm likely to live with my infirmity for many years to come and yet as Chris Ridge I'm not even at retirement age.'

'And why can't you go back?'

'I wouldn't trade this for what I had. This is a real life.'

Jade couldn't hold back the cynical laugh. 'This...?'

'Closest I've had to it. Closest I've got to it.'

She took a step back. 'On second thoughts, go ahead and use the name. You're welcome to it. I'll even use it too. Just another white lie I'll add to my collection.'

Jade said goodbye with little more than a wave. She sat back in Graham's car and he reversed the car over the loose chips while she invented details of her conversation with her father.

'I should meet him next time,' Graham said as the car rolled slowly down the cul de sac.

Jade looked at him, remarking to herself how dramatic the shift in his

demeanour was when he settled back into his possessive nature. She ignored her feelings and caught sight of a man out the back of a flat then demanded that Graham stop the car.

She gave no explanation and surprised Graham by walking up the weather-beaten man as if trying to intimidate him. All the man could do was shake his head and gesture in the direction of the supermarket.

With her hands buried in the front pocket of her hoodie and an inconspicuous grin she sat back in the car. Graham tried to ask the obvious, but was silenced by her suddenly charming performance.

‘Graham, my butcher’s apprentice boyfriend, I’ve a favour to ask and I wouldn’t ask it without knowing you understood my intentions were always good, but...how much money do you have?’

There was a noticeable change in Tim’s overall appearance. Edie had noticed it was something about the face, the unkempt hair, and Brittney reassured her that it was only because he had been through the disciplinary process.

‘I heard he’d been a naughty boy,’ Edie said with her regularly mischievous smile.

‘If by naughty you mean throwing his toys out of the cot, than yes.’

‘Something about swearing so I heard, but Carl told me they had checked the cameras and had him against the wall about taking too many toilet breaks as well.’

‘Really? Well, that’s not on.’

‘The spying or the toilet breaks?’

‘Both.’

‘And now he has to clock in and out each time he uses the toilet as if they’ll be docking his pay for using the toilet.’

‘That’s wrong. Still, he was probably up there using his phone - they all do it - and sulking isn’t going to help.’

‘I think it’s a bit humiliating - he just needs a friend.’

They watched as Campbell moved just as slowly out of another aisle and pretended to ram his trolley into Tim’s.

‘Here’s another one,’ Brittney observed, going back to her preparation. ‘Boys, eh.’

Campbell stopped him and knowing it wasn’t what he wanted to hear filled him in on something he missed. ‘They had the team photo earlier.’

Tim’s face which was already sour was screwed up into the ultimate distasteful expression. In an almost comical meltdown and verging on falsetto his voice broke as he ranted, Uh, ah, is that how it is? That’s just...real nice, that

is. Wow, and I walked past Dianne and Barb - they didn't say anything about it.'

'No surprise there then. The rest of us were out back. They tried to get everyone, but yeah Mags sent the slug out to gather the rest of us.'

'The Plug, you mean?'

'Whichever. We were all there - well, only the team that's hitting the big time. But then you are going to the big store aren't you?'

'Yes, I am.' Tim fumed and tried to shake it off.

'Good money, good opportunity.'

'For what? For being treated like shit some more. They've got the same structure as we have here, like nothing about it is different.'

'Free travel to any city you want. That's my plan.'

'What?'

'They've got that bridge or tunnel or whatever, the gate. Most of the shoppers are coming in from the cities and that means they've got to go back the same way. I just step into the crowd and I can make a new start.'

'And you can't get in a car or a bus?'

'No, I can't. There's nothing for me here, but the memory of you know - I can't sit around hearing my mum and Mags going on about him like he was just a drinking friend. They didn't know him and they'll never know how much more than a friend he was. They've just got that narrow view.'

Tim hesitated, reading Campbell's face in a different way. His own mood was thawing and now he suddenly realised he was Campbell's confidant like no one else.

'Don't go all quiet on me now.'

'No, I was checking to see if you were joking or not.'

Campbell shook his head. 'Would I?'

'So you're just going to disappear?'

'Yeah, I probably shouldn't have told you about it but hey.'

'I won't tell anyone.' Tim was getting his arrogant swagger back. They walked together as slowly as possible until he couldn't keep serious any longer. 'Except Maggie.'

'Mags? Go on then, tell Mags.'

'I can't believe you call your grandmother Mags.'

'What? She loves it.'

'Yeah? Just as much as she loves homos?'

Campbell overshadowed him and disguised a punch to Tim's arm which he accepted as well-deserved.

Tim recoiled in fake pain even though it had actually numbed his whole arm, mumbling, 'Don't touch me, fag.' He laughed it off as Campbell chased him

down for another hit and pleaded, 'No. This is my playing arm.'

'Playing?'

'You know what I mean.'

From where Edie and Brittney stood it looked as if the two of them had resolved their issues. Tim seemed to be gesticulating like a rapper which for both of them meant things were back to normal.

Just inside the storeroom entrance a conversation of an entirely nature was being conducted. Liam had questioned Brad, who had returned for the weekend from army training, on how much work it had been. He had almost exhausted all the indirect ways of asking if he had had time to research his particular interest and it took listening through a detailed description of every hour of his day to reach a point where he could not stand it any longer.

'So, have they taught you how to make a bomb yet?' Liam asked in as comical a secretive aside as was possible.

'I knew you were going to ask that, so I made sure to bring this with me.' He fished a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it over. 'Pretty glad to get rid of it to be honest. I was lucky I got chatting to this weird kid from Auckland that no one knew rather than go around asking everybody. It's not like it's part of the training, but we were supposed to have at least a little interest in electronics so I thought I'd risk it with him and bingo.'

'Are you for real?' Liam looked over the diagram.

'He's pretty on to it. You might need to learn some basic electronics to understand it.'

Carl spotted the passing of the note and took the opportunity to insert himself in the conversation. He jumped to a conclusion which was quickly accepted, asking, 'What's that? Codes for gaming I bet. That's all they do in the army now isn't it? Sitting behind a computer and dropping bombs? Bet you're glad you played all those first-person shooters, eh?'

Liam and Brad shared a look, nodding while Carl asked the same catch-up questions to Brad. This time he answered in astute one word answers.

'Well, there's a lot of excitement here too. Well, I'm excited. Guess who just made the team, even after that swear jar incident.'

Brad was in the dark, looking for an explanation from Liam.

'Aw, Maggie flipped her lid earlier this week because she found this jar on the racking out here with a label on it that read "Swear jar: fifty cents per swear word – some staff are exceptions" which was actually pretty funny because she apparently found the jar, which had been in plain sight for at least a week, and started ripping into Carl about it.'

'It's because I didn't tell her who did it. So she thought it was me or just took

it out on me.'

'Who did it?'

'Chris. It was the last thing he did before they fired him.'

'Over a swear jar?'

'No, he was still in the trial period. He refused to work for McJimray's and then they figured he was not well enough to carry on in produce. He was giving all of them assholes all day. It was legendary. Fridays haven't been the same - not since he left and since you left for that matter. Well, it doesn't matter - everything changes tomorrow. We get one day to learn the system and then it's all on.'

'So, are you coming to opening?' Liam asked not realising Tim had crept up behind him.

'Are you coming to opening?' Tim repeated, mimicking Liam's sincerity and high-pitched tone while also scaring Liam into falling over his trolley.

Before Brad could answer Dianne pushed through the doors and with her usual demeaning way said, 'Come on guys. Don't want to be spoken to about this in the office for a second time this week, do we?'

She carried on past, her wake dragging Carl and Campbell away to their bays but only pausing the conversation for a few seconds.

Brad sniggered, 'She didn't even say hello.'

'Nothing changes here,' Liam said putting one foot on his trolley and exposed the paper in his pocket.

'I don't miss that. I don't miss the Plug.'

'What's this?' Tim asked but snatched the paper from Liam's pocket before he could even speak. 'Ah, seems to be a picture of some geek shit.' He looked at Brad and then back at the diagram, only half-committed to finding out what it was. 'Is this what I think it is?'

'If you think it is something you should keep quiet about and put away immediately, then yeah,' Brad answered.

'A science project,' Liam corrected.

Tim stared him down and handed over the paper. 'A science project? Well, promise me you'll bring your project to work one day. It would do a world of good.'

'It would eh.'

Brad laughed again, 'Wow, nothing does change. They're still trying to fire you Tim and Liam's still trying to blow everything up.'

The noise of Layne swearing down the other end of the storeroom was followed by chicken feed raining down over other pallets and the concrete floor. Dianne tried to urge him to stop and move forward, positioning herself in his

blind spot. He jerked backwards ripping the 25kg bag completely open. The hail of feed could not distract the eyes from anticipating Layne's reversing over Dianne, but it never happened. Instead he stopped the forklift as it was and walked away shaking his head uncontrollably.

Tim couldn't help himself from being the first to comment. 'So close.'

'One day,' Brad said.

Brussel and Karl cruised past the deli cabinets with their usual strut aware that Matt could hear them from the butchery chiller.

Brussel sang out, 'Are you ladies excited by the shopping opportunities which have arrived at your doorstep?'

Jade and Edie looked up having been interrupted at a crucial moment in their conversation and stared him down.

'Hold up there Brussel,' Karl said sensing some kind of unease which he felt he was pretty successful at alleviating. 'Are you telling me that these fine women won't be joining us behind the scenes at McJimray's? On behalf of the corporation I would like to offer my condolences to us for not having you as our neighbours for the course of the sale.'

Edie broke out of her trance and took a step over to Karl. 'I'm sorry for your loss, but you'll lose more than that if you don't push off.'

Brussel nudges Karl. 'Oop, not a good time. Personally I'm a bit sorry I'll be working through the sale.'

'Yeah, don't feel sorry for us or nothing.'

'Christmas only comes twice a year and we'll be missing out on stocking up.'

'Christmas?' Roy, the produce manager, erupted and caught the two of them as they moved away from the women. 'I've heard it called many things, but the presence of a giant supermarket does not make Christmas.'

'I didn't mean to offend you,' Brussel said, testing to see what wind there was behind Roy's sails.

'I've even heard some people saying because they can fit upwards of one hundred thousand people that these Globomarts are the escape vessels for the chosen.'

Karl splintered off seeing Peter emerge from the deli chiller with Brittney. 'Same shit different boss is all I can say.'

'Same boss too,' Matt said, in part referring to himself as the team was unlikely to change in the move.

Brussel was caught up in Roy's conspiracy-preaching. 'I thought you were a holy man.'

'They have the capability to jettison the turbine engines and lower decks and propel themselves upwards, did you know that? Intended for evacuation

purposes as in tidal waves or big storms, hostile takeovers, etc. The whole thing blasting into space.'

'Saving the chosen few from the fate of those left behind.'

Karl carried on, picking up a leg of lamb as he spoke, 'There's no way that MJ's character could fill Peter's shoes however. They can replace each one of us but that man at the top, he's the backbone of this establishment.'

Peter himself had started blushing. Brittney had realised he was no longer listening to her and stood back waiting for him. He was wearing the deli hat and apron as was the department uniform - another week spent working in a department, going through each process like no other manager would do, unless as Roy had suggested to a few others he was learning how they operated to such a first-hand level so that he could start a new supermarket from scratch.

'Long live the boss!' Karl called out over Brussel and Roy's conversation, drawing attention to himself and his caveman stance, leg bone in hand.

Peter cleared his throat and walked past the butchery department, collecting Roy on the way. Brittney stood back, muttering to herself, 'Just walk away in the middle of a conversation Peter.'

The men dispersed with Brussel also muttering about Roy's fanaticism, a word which Karl agreed with only to stop nodding with a blank stare and ask for 'English please, Brussel. Some of us went to a normal school. We didn't have fancy things like books.'

'Put the leg down and I'll explain, my pupil.'

Edie found Brittney's standing in astonishment too inviting not to share the latest episode. She shared Jade's confession but before she finished Brittney acted out her frustration physically, becoming less and less in the mood to listen to Edie's voice anymore.

'And so she probably feels a little embarrassed for making it up and I think it best that we just give her a bit of space for a while. I've accepted the apology... and I think her father's quite ill.'

Brittney felt as if she was backed into the bench and tried to speak with her normal voice, but a cartoon mutter came out. 'Well, where's my apology?' she asked and watched Jade talking with Barb over by the bulk foods department. 'What is she talking to Barb for?'

'Maybe she's signing up for the grocery department.'

'Well, I can help her with that,' Brittney said making her way to Maggie's office. 'Nothing like a personal recommendation.'

'We can't do without her for a week!' Edie shouted.

'We've got Peter this week! And anyway, who says it's just for a week?'

In the storeroom Layne was in the process of sweeping up the mess he had

made. He felt it was necessary to apologise to Peter who had caught sight of the congregating staff and come close enough to discover that it was only another breakage. Peter couldn't stop Layne from apologising fast enough and urged him to put his energy into cleaning up faster.

Layne shuffled off to the side, swaying his head, and picked up the broom again.

Carl couldn't help himself. 'He was only trying to say sorry, Peter.'

'It's OK, Carl,' Peter said about to walk off with Roy.

Carl stared at his boss although the eye contact was never shared. 'It's OK? Maybe it's OK, maybe it's not. To him to buy that bag costs about an hour's work and he felt sorry for wasting it - he was only thinking of the loss. But to you, obviously you don't value it the same as he does. You don't even value his apology. It's one thing to ignore the loss - that's OK - but it's not OK to ignore someone else's honour.'

Roy spoke for Peter, trying to calm the situation. 'Thank you Carl.'

Cadence did the same by pulling Carl around like a dog on a leash. He was shaking with anger.

Tim stepped in to help Layne, followed by Brad and Liam, saying, 'I think we all could do with a holiday.'

Layne responded, 'Yeah, it's called McJimray's Globowhatever. You're all invited.'

'Even me?' Carl said, shaking it off.

Dianne could be heard in the distance, 'Only because Kevin hurt his back playing cricket.'

'Shut up,' Tim said under his breath. 'Or Liam will blow you up.'

'Shut up, Tim,' Liam seethed.

Barb came round the end of the shelving unit to find a crowd of helpers looking like a flock of chickens picking up the mash piece by piece. 'Aw, a party and I wasn't invited.'

Tim echoed her, 'Aw, a staff photo and I wasn't invited.'

'Yeah,' Carl said, laughing to himself, 'I forgot about that.'

Various hands patted Tim while they pretended to feel sorry for him.

Layne found himself pushed off to the side by the helpers somewhat happy he had so much backup. He caught his breath while looking down the other end of the storeroom. From behind the shelving Jade appeared. She had an envelope and quickly handed it to Barb while the cranky woman looked at her in disgust. With the sour face she still took the envelope and immediately stuffed it in her pocket, nodding away and pretending nothing had happened.

Maggie also entered the storeroom and found the crowd of helpers amusing,

but only for a moment. She called for everyone's attention and launched into a half-hearted motivational speech for the coming challenge.

'We're going to bring the same level of conduct and effort that we always bring tomorrow. We're going to make each other and Otago proud for our friendliness and level of commitment. We have to welcome to the team a couple of late additions. Carl, you may already be aware, will be replacing Peter's cricket import who will be taking light duties at the checkouts until further notice. The other new addition is from another department altogether, so make her feel welcome tomorrow - she'll be new to it all.' Maggie swivelled around and caught sight of Jade who met her stare with a vacant, what-am-I-still-doing-out-here look on her face. 'Jade, welcome to the team.'

Maggie, Barb and Dianne dispersed without looking at her, leaving her to stand awkwardly by while the crowd made their incomprehensible comments and waved. She nervously laughed and waved back, trying to hide an obvious ignorance and lack of enthusiasm.

A red-faced Jade arrived at the deli counter with Edie looking worried and Brittney became suddenly busy.

'What's happened, dear?'

'Oh, it's nothing - it's just weird. I've been moved to a different department.'

Edie could not hide her concern. She glared at Brittney who fought against shrinking right back into the chiller. Instead Brittney launched herself forward and fussed around in the deli cabinet next to Jade, saying, 'It was a managerial decision.'

'You offered her services, you mean,' Edie said as under her breath as she could, not convincingly keeping it to herself.

Jade searched for confirmation either way, but Brittney wouldn't give it. 'Brittney, what did you do?'

'Your interests and skills seemed to lie with other departments...'

'What does that mean?'

Brittney turned but looked at her through closed eyelids. 'In the deli we're face to face with the customer all the time and one thing we can't dispense with is our sincerity. We have to make the customer feel important, not as if there are greater priorities. We need to communicate well with the customer and accept our responsibility - if we have done wrong, we'll be honest and not pick and choose who we fool and who we apologise to.'

'Are you talking about how I made up a story...'

'I think that's exactly what she's talking about,' Edie echoed, getting on her side.

Brittney's face grew redder and switched between the two with sharp focus.

Jade explained, 'I never told you that story. I told Edie.' She turned to Edie and directed her explanation at the both of them. 'So this is the sincerity which she's been talking about?'

Uncomfortably, Brittney muttered, 'You could just apologise and that would be it.'

'The real apology should be that I am sorry I just don't fit in. Sorry I didn't take this sharing our most personal details seriously. Sorry you were the victim of your own gossiping. I'm sorry for your obviously untested high ideals which seem so important you make it departmental policy. You're the manager of supermarket deli, Brittney - and Edie, you both work in a supermarket deli - don't take yourselves so seriously!'

Peter walked over to the deli after finishing his business with the produce manager, repositioning his deli hat as Jade prepared to storm out. She dumped her apron and hat on the bench and stopped in front of him, looked back at Brittney and said, 'Good, my replacement. I guess I'll join my new department.'

She walked past the butchery, into the storeroom and directly to the crowd of helpers who were still messing around at the far end. Their chatting was interrupted by her asking, 'Looks like the decision was effective immediately - who's up for training the new girl?'

Tim pushed the other teenagers away and brushed himself down. Even Carl felt like he would fight for the chance to be first in line and launched himself at him, saying, 'Don't you need to take a shit, Tim?'

She looked over the others to spot Layne by the forklift. 'Layne? How about you?'

It was a decision which cleared the area, sending Tim and Carl into a competition of who could annoy the other quickest. Liam rode his trolley into the middle of the storeroom with Brad and Campbell shaking their heads at the immaturity of the rest.

Layne couldn't say no but had to ask if it should be one of the supervisors that should train her.

'Probably, but who are they? Just a bunch of people good at making decisions for other people and bad at following their own rules.'

'Always the way, eh?'

His face with its heavily furrowed brow said he was thinking too deeply about something else.

'Question?'

'Was that you giving Barb something she didn't want to take just before?'

'Yep.'

'How did you know she was involved with the underbelly?'

‘Woman’s intuition.’

‘There’s a lot of that going around.’

‘Oh, and I asked your neighbour.’

‘You paid his debt?’

‘Yep.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I felt like it, Layne.’ Jade held her smile through the conversation, knowing that Layne was just as giving on the inside as she was.

‘That’s nice. Owes you one, he does - that’s for sure.’

‘I’m quite aware of that.’

Chris, who was leaning more towards having Layne call him John, had dragged himself out of the house certain the outside air and sun would motivate him. Feeling so utterly bored he considered taking a bashing just to see the highway and all of its traffic.

He started down the driveway, thinking twice about looking into the yard to his left, hoping that the man would not be sitting out there at all. All seemed quiet enough to make him breathe easier as he reached the letterbox. The smell of someone’s mid-morning roast caught his attention. The waves of warmth, the boiling fat puffing, extracted and spat out into the neighbourhood - he wondered how it was so clear to him what meat was being roasted, even how long it had to go.

It made him sick, the thought or the memory of roasts, missed occasions or opportunities as a family, perhaps even a recollection of a childhood somewhere at the back of his mind. The sense memory and the sight of cars rushing by were incompatible, two starkly different reactions. He flinched when he saw a ute speeding by with a trailer-load of carved up pork, the pink flesh piled up in large chunks fresh from the slaughterhouse and open to the air.

Then the smell of the cattle trucks sent him scurrying back up the driveway. Where are you now? John spoke aggressively to Chris, or the other way around. You could have left, walked down the road, hitchhiked away or jumped on a coach pretending to be a lost tourist - they would believe the old man had lost his ticket, it was an easy act.

He froze knowing that the neighbour had caught sight of him from the window. Why are you waiting? What are you waiting for? You’re like a herd animal just before its death, so calmly comfortable in the presence of other fellow beings burying your instincts, the voices in your head saying you are going to die. You’re insane. Do you want to die?

The neighbour raised a hand to wave. It was neutral. Chris looked behind him

and back at the neighbour and took a few steps forward which despite the taunting of his thoughts each quickening step felt lighter and lighter. By the time he had reached the door he had scanned the mail and found the personal invitation to the opening of McJimray's. In amongst the junk mail was another personal invitation to the Globomart, but this one was written by Jade demanding that he come down and meet her there.

Chris spent the day cleaning up and feeding himself properly. He even attempted some version of yoga in the hope of limbering up for what would be a long walk. Layne returned from the first day of his new appointment with little energy to notice the change in Chris. He needed all the sleep he could get as his head was frazzled.

The next day Chris put on his older clothes - the ones that made him feel like the person he wanted to be - and walked down the drive just after sunrise. There was no sign of the neighbour. He carried on down the highway hardly noticing the appearance of the same ute driving back to the slaughterhouse with its trailer full of live pigs, clambering over each other to right themselves.

It almost looked comical to the man in his new frame of mind. Even the cattle trucks couldn't change his mood - perhaps the wind was blowing favourably today, with a sea-breeze that came over him fresh and revitalising. The quiet streets of the North end became more industrial the closer he got to the coast. Some of the streets ended in eroded cliffs, Pacific waves grinding just out of sight, the most desolate and jarring sight, not shifting his mood in the least.

Humber Street led him in the direction of the harbour. He could already see what must have sent the locals crazy with conversation - the newspapers too which he had ignored, finding no value in current local events, would have been full of stories surrounding the arrival of this unbelievable sight.

The Globomart had amassed a crowd of spectators since sliding up to the wharf and extending its ramps to take on local stock and staff. It sat silently overshadowing the Historic precinct, being photographed and inspected by every nosy local and fascinated tourist. McJimray's was everyone's delight - if there were any fears they would be dispelled by mass-marketing campaigns, selected specifically to remove any doubt at how grand, how mind-blowing and how easy the McJimray's experience could be.

It would overshadow Christmas with its bargains; it would astound with its personal touch, tailored shopping plans, and realistic intelligent automation; and most of all it would capture the heart of every child, teenager and adult by bringing the greatest experience, choice and quality to everyone's neighbourhood.

Chris could absorb these notions if not through the air as if it was broadcast

to each and every mind. He would not notice but as soon as he stepped foot inside the ship at the stock entrance, disregarding warning signs and waving to staff who waved him in, that he was being scanned from then on.

There was a cheer from various familiar faces as he risked the apparent danger of trespassing. Carl and Tim in particular welcomed him aboard, their eyes and faces lit up with enthusiasm.

‘The big opening today. It’s all on.’

Chris just nodded at Carl’s statement, shaking his hand and then Tim’s, giving Tim a slap on the shoulder.

‘You stand around here too long and you’ll be roped into helping,’ Carl said.

Tim was speechless, he didn’t know where to start. ‘This is mad. OK, they’ve got wrist-scanners, like watches, meaning we can all check on stock levels at any time, check prices, even clock in and out.’

‘Which makes it easier for you when you need to take a shit.’ Carl looked at Chris and explained, ‘He had to clock in and out every time he used the toilet during a shift.’

‘But not here.’

‘And he can’t swear.’

‘Even though some others can,’ Tim said, disguising his comment with a cough. ‘More equal than others.’

‘The team’s working pretty good.’

‘We have our battle plan for the zombie apocalypse.’

Chris shook his head and walked with them as they moved through the storeroom, collecting Liam as they went.

Liam hushed Tim and reminded him, ‘We can’t discuss that anymore, because we’ve already been cautioned about excessive talking.’

‘By the McJimray’s boss?’

‘Who do you think? Dianne, Barb...don’t see much of Maggie - she’s got a lot on.’

Carl laughed, ‘We’ve already lost one person over it.’

‘Over talking?’

‘Yep.’

‘Zombie apocalypse did it.’

‘We were picking our weapons and where we would make an ambush.’

Carl carried on, ‘And then Jade suggested we would need to defend the storeroom rather than just kill them all - by then we had half the team discussing where we would sleep, how we’d barricade the doors, etc.’

They passed the cardboard crusher, Liam skipped over to it and grabbed an object with his skinny arms. ‘This was my favourite.’ It was a bulky scythe-

shaped instrument for pulling the cardboard bales out of the machine.

‘Too heavy.’

Chris caught up with the conversation. ‘I agree. You’ll take two sweeps with that and you won’t be able to lift it again.’

Liam shrugged and agreed, putting the thing back.

‘Box-cutters.’

‘Stanley knives.’

‘Defence is your only strategy. What happened to Jade?’ Chris asked.

‘She got moved.’

‘Again.’

Tim nodded. ‘She threw herself on the grenade. For the team. Said it was her fault we were all talking. Really we’re just excited. At least now we’ll have the upper-hand in the zombie apocalypse.’

‘Yeah, we’ll be ready.’

‘The Plug will just be fodder.’

Chris laughed and shook his head, asking, ‘Where is she now?’

‘Jade? No one knows.’

‘It’s a secret.’

‘Graham might know,’ Tim thought, nodding to himself. ‘He’s over in butchery, but they’re pretty busy.’

‘It’s a real meat works over there, from start to finish. It ain’t pretty.’

Carl poked at Tim, saying, ‘You’d be up for that, butt-plugger.’

‘Shut up kiddie-fiddler.’

‘What?’

Liam burst out, ‘Kid-fid Carl!’

‘Shut up Liam!’ Tim yelled. ‘We don’t say that in front of him.’

Chris, distracted by his amazement again, took the opportunity to say he’d see them later and wander through the doors while they carried on chatting. The storeroom he had left would surely be only for the supermarket wing, in fact only for the local stock. He could see people disappearing into another storeroom at another corner. In between the two entries another set of plastic doors opened and Graham pushed a trolley to a meat chiller.

‘Care to show an old man around?’ Chris asked him.

Graham laughed and replied, ‘Who let you in?’

‘You’re not too busy then?’

‘Actually no - they haven’t got the chain running smoothly yet. Too many new machines at my end. Plus, there were delays with the stock. There’s a lot of guys just standing around. Most of them will only be here three days out of the week to fill the freezers. Walk in, walk out through the portal. We should check

that out if we can.'

'How long until I get discovered?'

'Hold on.' Graham disappeared behind the doors and brought out an apron and hat. 'Put these on Chris. Let's go for a walk.'

Passing by the checkouts it was apparent there would be little need for staff down that end. An automated machine scanned them as they passed and started playing some computer-generated demonstration, but cancelled when they moved out of range.

'Even the shelves talk to you in here,' Graham said rushing Chris through. 'This is a whole new world.'

He gestured as they moved into the body of the mall. The depth deceived the eye. Above them long rows of windows showed blue sky. Shops of all kinds passed by, but nothing could be more distracting than the projected visuals hitting the ceiling as they reached the centre. Music melded with the footage with colour and pattern exploding from one end of the ring to the other. In the middle of the ring stood the portal that Graham had mentioned.

'That thing is going to bring the flood. The locals get half a day of this to themselves. Anyone with any sense would get in quick, but when that opens, gateways from Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland open too. Well, one night each city but you get the picture. Tonight I think it's Auckland's turn. They'll all pass through the centre and then, if they want, they can filter through the fantasy suites.'

Four stations were set up, half-disguised by plants and water features. Their purpose seemed to lie somewhere between toilet block and film theatres - Chris couldn't work out which applied.

Graham tried to get his bearings and closed in on one of the units, calling Jade's name. Against Chris' better judgement he followed Graham who comically gestured for him to come quietly as he pushed open the door. Graham shook his head and led Chris to the next door and then finally to the last door in the unit. When he found what he was looking for he backed out and pushed Chris in, saying, 'Now you've seen it all. I better go.'

The old man's eyes took time to adjust and he focused on what seemed to be a person reclined in a chair. Chris threw out his hand and dragged Graham in by the apron. 'You're not going anywhere. What's going on?'

LED lights blinked and meters adjusted in the silence of the darkened room. Graham's teeth shined as he beamed and sniggered nervously.

'It's Jade. She's indisposed. It's a sensory deprivation kind of virtual reality thing. It's supposed to shuttle the customer's through and upload all this information about them. They have this guided fantasy, interacting with

memories depending on how deep they want to go, and it streamlines their shopping experience by defining what really makes them happy or makes other people happy depending on the shopper. I don't know - I won't go near the machines, but Jade can't stay off them. It's her job to get to know the experience, but she can't stop talking about it.'

Chris moved around to the side of the chair watching the motionless body.

'Some people apparently find the headset too much - nauseating - so they can watch from the chair like TV,' Graham said turning a dial which faded a projected image so they could just see the movements of random people. 'Look, there's Brittney!'

From what Chris had seen of her this was an accurate image. 'These are memories?'

Graham found the volume and turned the dial slowly as he began whispering, 'It's like dreaming - sometimes it's pretty close to real life, but then it can also be a little different, distorted and stuff.'

'And the fantasy?'

'It's part of it. Only she will know what is real and what is not, and I presume the computer does too. Depends on how much you want to dwell on the past I guess.'

Brittney's voice caught both of them by surprise. The frequency came directly from the centre, clear as day and they realised they were part of a candid staffroom conversation.

'So, you think you'll stay in little old Oamaru, what with its ridiculously old population and a billion babies, mowed down by mobility scooters and prams? I hear it's pretty bleak out there looking for a man.'

'And she'd know...' Graham coughed as if his opinion could enter into the conversation.

Brittney continued as if she was amplified with every following sentence, 'I mean, it's got to be better than the city, less stress and all that, but there's not a lot of choice.'

Whatever Jade thought she was keeping it to herself. Brittney waited for a response without a hint that she felt it was weird there was a one-sided conversation going on. In contrast Chris was disturbed, looking through Jade's eyes and being spoken to by the woman without the ability to set her straight.

'You've got to be nice to Graham, haven't you? He'd like to think you came back for him, but...' Brittney faded out, the screen grew whiter until a new image came into focus.

An uncertain voice echoed, 'It's got to be better than the city.'

Chris suddenly commented, 'It makes you wonder who really has control

over thoughts.' Auckland Harbour Bridge came into view. 'Makes you want to only talk to positive people. Who knows what we'd think without other people's voices in our heads?'

The image scanned the harbour, Chris and Graham both losing their balance as the car slowed and accelerated.

'That was a near-miss,' Chris said as Jade focused on the driver. It was her father, the real Chris and he nervously cleared his throat. 'That's a few years back.'

'That's not you though is it?'

'No, but there's a few landmarks missing. Those ugly Northcote apartment buildings. I'd say almost ten years.'

Images blurred - her father carrying a guitar case, a group practicing, he and another group member studying a recorded gig.

Chris laughed abruptly as he recognised the act. 'The Fleetwood Mac Experience. He was in that?'

'The what?'

'Classic rock revival. They're all doing that on the covers circuit. Must have been doing alright then. Wasn't dressed like me then was he?'

Graham looked at the old man completely confused.

'Impersonator. He started impersonating me.'

'Aah.' Graham nodded and tried to ignore him.

'Must have been...' He ignored himself as he did the calculations in his head. 'Must have been a good guitarist, keeping up with the songs. Or not, if he turned to impersonating.'

There was some kind of argument that Chris talked over. Jade stormed out and didn't stop walking until she had reached a reserve. Chris and Graham stood in awkward silence as they both acknowledged it shouldn't be the intended use of the fantasy suite to relive such moments.

Soon it was clear she was on the phone and Chris jumped to a conclusion. 'She'll be talking to her mother.'

She sat on a picnic table looking out at the beach at low tide. One shoulder of Rangitoto Island could be seen on the horizon and pohutukawa branches blew around above her. There was no sense that she was enjoying the solitude and when she was interrupted by a group of teenage males there was also no sense that she was enjoying the attention.

At first the conversation was somewhat usual for teenagers, some superficial statements revolving around her clothes and hair, then the phone was grabbed and became the topic of a different conversation.

Chris just about leapt out of his spot as he watched. Graham swore under his

breath and shook his head as he watched the group make the phone disappear and fend her off. One of the boys, head to toe dressed like he was fresh off the basketball court, draped an arm around her just for a second.

Jade turned around and around, moving away from this boy but finding herself surrounded by the gesturing group. Another boy pulled at his crotch.

‘Turn it off,’ Chris said.

Graham felt the same way and searched in the dark for the dials.

Catching a glimpse of the father walking over the reserve grass prompted Chris to retract. ‘Hold on there.’

Chris, the father, moved in and ran into trouble immediately on entering their circle. While one gave a nudge to his back the others taunted him. Jade was pulled away by another, but gave some resistance. They seemed to be more distracted by this man who waved his fist about with his car keys clenched between fingers. Jade backed away only onto the beach where she screamed for help.

The first time Graham or Chris heard her voice was her panicked protests as they leapt on him. One of the group ripped at his hand to get the keys, pulling back the fingers. Jade’s father yelled in pain and let them take the keys which were then thrown into the bushes. He could only put his hands up to fend off the punches and when he couldn’t stand any longer his hands also took the worst of the kicks.

It was burned into Jade’s memory, every detail, and now burned into theirs. Once the group had moved away Jade tried to find where the blood was coming from. She wanted to hold his hands but couldn’t bring herself to do it. On one hand two fingers sat on top of the knuckles pulled out of their sockets and the other was awash with red.

When others came to help, she looked towards the bushes and decided to look for the keys. She scanned the grass and pushed branches back, taking glimpses at the attempts to get him off the ground. Each direction she looked in the bushes looked the same. Tears fell to the grass between her feet. Her vision became blurred as she took another look at her father.

She then walked off the edge of the reserve onto the beach and carried on walking over the rocks and around the cliff face.

Jade didn’t look back and instead broke into a run. She almost flew over the rockpools, looking into the distance as the next bay opened up to her with a white sand bank stretching out as far as she could see. She changed direction and veered towards the small waves. As she reached the water she skipped weightlessly over the shallows and then crashed into the deeper water with such force that the screen instantly went black. There was only murky patches of light

which darkened as she sank to the depth that made her satisfied.

The suite came alive with lights and soothing music, almost like the credits rolling in a cinema, just as Jade appeared to be waking. She looked over at Graham first and smiled, saying hello calmly and happily surprised. Then she turned to see Chris not noticing the shock on either of their faces. She pushed herself up and off the reclined chair and into Chris' arms.

'Thank you for coming,' she said, hugging him with some force.

Chris searched for the right thing to say but couldn't come up with anything, still lost in confusion.

'Are you alright?' Graham asked and Jade nodded and sighed. 'Do you remember what you saw?'

'Oh,' she sang, pausing to think. 'It's not really about that, I don't think. The first time - which is a preprogrammed thing - McJimray's wants you to undergo a total scan, like your life flashing before your eyes. You don't remember much of that. But after that you just kind of dream through things and come out with an overall kind of...'

'Catharsis?' Chris finished her sentence and from her acknowledging expression deduced that he was correct.

She thought for a moment and began to utter, 'Wait something's coming back to me.' She looked around at her memories as if they were floating in the air. 'Oh, no...maybe. Doesn't matter.'

Jade looked at Chris shaking her head and laughing at how vague she was being. He thought for a moment he could see tears beginning to form, but she breathed a deep breath and nodded emphatically at him.

'It's not about remembering. It's about letting go.' Jade turned and looked at Graham. 'You need to try this.'

'I'm not trying it.'

'Yes,' she countered.

'No, this is how they spy on you, but inside you. They use this information to sell you shit. This is mind control times a thousand.'

'No,' she said with the same sincere and fascinated tone. 'You're being silly. This is safe and...' Jade turned to Chris now. 'Everyone needs this.'

'I'm leaning towards Graham's take on the whole thing. You say they scan you - life flashes before your eyes - well, I haven't got all day.'

'Yes you do.'

Graham butted in, 'Well, I definitely haven't. I'm out. Love you and leave you.'

Jade gave him a don't-go-look as softly and sweetly as she could muster then faced Chris again with an assertive eye-lock, 'You're getting in the chair.'

She circled him and shook her head as Chris protested, ignoring his words and he found himself moved closer to the chair in a smooth dance move.

‘This is my domain now. I’ll wait outside like I’m supposed to do and make sure you have all the time you need.’ She shook her head again as he shook his. ‘McJimray’s wants this of all its customers. It’s like a free service. Apparently not many take the opportunity. They have more suites than last time so that people can take the time they need and there is nothing like a refreshing day-dream in the middle of a busy day. Take your time.’

‘Jade, this is...’

‘Remember: let go and just go along for the ride. The more you do let go, the more you believe it - the better it gets. I’m sure you’ve got something in that life of yours that you want to feel again.’

Chris laid back in defiance and took his time answering. ‘Everything.’

‘Everything?’

‘Anything.’

‘That too?’

‘Anything and everything,’ he said smiling at her, unsure whether he was being ironic or sincere.

‘Then that’s just what you’ll get.’

Chris chuckled and gave in as the headset was put in place.

‘MAY NOT THE
SPACE BETWEEN
HEAVEN AND EARTH
BE COMPARED
TO A BELLOWS?’

In partnership with Manukau City centre, the gate through which customers would enter McJimray’s was set up in the heart of the shopping centre. The line of people waiting started at the heart and trailed all the way out to the bus stops. Luckily it was a fine day in the Auckland region. Complaints could be heard in regards to the morning sun starting to hit those outside hard.

For those who arrived earlier the harder thing to ignore was the crowds of everyday shoppers who did not or could not purchase tickets to enter McJimray’s. Even at the food court where Miriam and her mother Vanessa stood, with Edwin in a wheelchair and Pablo in the bassinet, and a hundred pairs of eyes flicking from them to other families or groups, the effect was more uncomfortable than morning sun.

‘I don’t want to feel like I’m on show just because we could afford it,’ Vanessa spoke somewhere at a level between what Miriam understood and what Edwin would care to hear.

Edwin placed a hand on her arm for a moment.

‘Why do they stare so much?’ She continued moaning.

Miriam wouldn’t hide her undying fascination. ‘Because they’re interested,’ she said from behind Edwin’s wheelchair, resting on the handles. She thought she saw someone she knew from school, but then realised where she had really

seen the boy from.

Rosana and Viliami had inspected the gate and now studied the crowd to work how they would get out the main doors.

‘Do we really need to go all the way back out?’ Viliami asked. ‘Couldn’t we just cut in?’

‘Aw, as if,’ Rosana grunted out of breath and out of ideas. ‘Do we honestly have to go around and then out the back entrance?’

She answered her own question with a swift pace, pulling Viliami with her. She had every intention of pushing through the crowd at the entrance or getting lost in the swelling line in a way that made her feel the least guilty.

They had closed in on the line, catching all these confusing glances, when Viliami felt like a girl was staring at him. She leaned out from behind the wheelchair and mouthed the word ‘Sorry’ directly at him. He stared back and made a harsh expression of ignorance, took a few more steps with Rosana pulling at his t-shirt and wondered if she was that white girl in the car who did the fingers to him. She was too pretty for that, he decided, as they hit the crowd at the entrance.

‘You don’t have to feel sorry for them, Miri.’ Her mother had caught her, translated her apology into pity, which even at Miriam’s age sounded like a pointless and patronising feeling.

She couldn’t explain and so nodded to her mum who now smiled at her and then towards Edwin as if she was connecting the feeling of pity to her grandfather now - perhaps something to do with him being the principal of the school for so long that it broke him. Miriam didn’t know what to feel. If she was honest she was a little annoyed he hadn’t recognised her as for her it had been a pretty big deal. She decided she could handle the frustration as that little boy wouldn’t be treated to McJimray’s like she was. She didn’t really want to feel bad at all.

The reason for the swelling crowd at the entrance could only be the result of close to one hundred and fifty students clustering, breaking away, surging back together, and growing impatient with standing still. With each anonymous push from behind another two or three students squeezed into the echoing foyer and none would flow backwards. The whole foyer was theirs and while most stood in an orderly fashion, some small groups sat down or leaned against pillars, playing our scenes or rehearsing dances for the production.

Tristan had almost lost his voice and Erana her patience in relation to the cast. Although it was barely audible Tristan leaned in towards Erana and repeated their in-joke, ‘What have we done?’

‘Well, it certainly wasn’t my idea even if it was my doing. Pity we couldn’t

reward them after the night when they're all exhausted from rehearsals. Energy levels and self-control...'

'One hundred and fifty tickets? Three extra supervisors? One thing's for sure. We'll have to win now.'

'What's that I can't hear you?'

'We'll have to win now!' Tristan's voice was reduced to a coarse hiss and warble.

Erana smiled and nodded. 'We've already won.'

As Rosana found, while the queue extended out the front entrance and the southern parking lot filled first, people like her having to park in the north and west of the building were entering from back entrances, finding their way to the front of the queue and having to work back. Now Luke and Lolita, pushing baby Denim around had come to the same realisation that it was too far to go to get to the end of the queue.

'Nah, that's not happening.'

Lolita, a busy jumble of earrings, necklaces and manually-curled locks of hair, fussed over the baby and vented her frustration. 'What, you want to push in?'

'Yuh, we've got a baby. Just push the pram in wherever.'

While a huge roar of laughter and yelling came from the students further back Luke and Lolita moved towards the queue. Miriam was first to shift forward when she caught a glimpse of the scary-looking guy in the puffy jacket. Those behind could barely be heard criticising the move. Luke shut them up with a look and still felt the need to dismiss them as if they were in the wrong.

Lolita tried to hide her embarrassment, stuttering as she tried to highlight the infant that had become their excuse for everything.

'Keep pushing forward,' Luke said, nudging Lita. 'Go.'

'No, Mu - stop it.'

Luke didn't look at the others in the queue. He stared at the gate as it lit up. 'Look at that shit.'

The group of students erupted again with the excitement of something happening. Those who were on the floor stood up and those rehearsing broke out of their poses to look, but all that resulted was another push which could be felt rippling through the queue right up to Lolita.

She gripped the handles and tried to breathe through it all. 'If anyone stands on my shoes I'm out.'

'Your shoes? What about the baby?' Luke talked down to her.

'They're my only good pair. Not like we can even afford this.'

'I told you they're getting the money back.'

‘You should never have paid so much.’

‘I had to.’

‘Now they gotta get it back. And have they?’

‘I told you, not yet.’

Lolita thought for a minute, looking behind her to see who was pushing. She swore under her breath and struggled to keep from feeling dizzy. ‘Call them.’

‘I called them yesterday.’

‘Call them again Mu. Get your money back.’

‘Who do you keep looking at?’ Amy asked her brother as they stood at the front of the pack trying to set a good example.

Olly ignored her and looked in another direction. Most others were at the very least fascinated in the gate while it lit up and taunted them. Olly had eyeballed someone further up the line and Amy made it her mission to find out.

She pulled a food court chair over to her and stood on it.

‘Amy, you freak, what are you doing?’

‘Is that Mrs Baxter? I’m going to go talk to her.’ Amy jumped down and moved the chair back. She found Olly standing over her when she turned.

‘What?’ He asked his sister with puzzling abruptness.

‘What what?’

‘Don’t go over there?’

‘Why?’

‘You’re not allowed.’

Amy skipped up to Mrs Richardson and asked for permission. The nod made Olly leap forward to head her off.

‘What are you doing, Amy?’

‘What is it to you?’

Olly was trying to block her but she crossed through the line and skipped away from him.

‘I just want to know,’ Olly said grabbing her sleeve and stopping her.

Amy looked at the grip he had on the sleeve and glared at him. ‘She was my jazz dance teacher last year. I wanted to ask her if she was coming back next year. Is that alright?’

Amy didn’t seem any less motivated to catch up with Vanessa. To the students she was one of those teachers that was young enough to relate to, even emulate. Her olive skin was no less perfect and her body no less trim after the pregnancy. Olly stood behind his sister taking in these same details, but on his own level.

His sister said hello to Mr Williams, making sure to give him the same respect she would have at school, and then acknowledged the baby even though

she had little experience with these. She tried to ask Vanessa if she would return next year which was a topic greeted with a warm consideration but no conclusion.

Vanessa nodded along while studying Olly's face. She turned just enough so that he could see the baby's face and watched his youthful resilience crumble.

Amy, immediately feeling like she was being ignored, looked at the baby once more and back at her brother. It was an awkward pause waiting for Olly's eye contact. He was clearly struggling to take his eyes off Vanessa and the baby. When he did he got Amy's glare again, this time the expression did not change. Instead, the furrow grew deeper with every second. Olly cleared his throat and searched for the words to excuse himself politely.

Pulling herself away, Amy looked back at Mrs Baxter and called her by this married name.

'Please Amy - call me Vanessa.'

This was a change in formality Amy found unusually distressing. She took a look around the family once more, at the wide-eyed Miriam, damaged Edwin, the newborn, and this angelic woman, Vanessa. There was no more superficial questions to ask. Amy shook off the dissonance, won over by Vanessa's smile once more, and leaned in, asking 'Vanessa, can I hold the baby?'

Olly in contrast shrank away, caught only by fleeting glimpses as he headed back to the safety of the group.

Ash and Bernie welcomed him back from the catch up with Mrs Baxter, confused with Amy's sudden interest in babies.

'Uh, it's so tiny,' Bernie said squishing her chin into her neck.

Ash caught Olly's eyes and asked, 'Not into babies?'

'What do you think?'

Ash laughed. 'Oo babies, yuk. Can't be near a baby.'

Another surge pushed her towards Olly. While most were worried the surges would get uncomfortable, Ash and Olly were welcoming the chaos. The push back gave her a reason to shunt her shoulder into his side and Olly laughed it off. She pretended to be sorry but then received a shunt from Olly.

'Sorry,' he said, playing the game.

Andy, riding along in Martin's four-wheeled drive, remembered the image he had in his mind when Andre and he dreamed of winning a spot on this ship. It seemed such an unlikely possibility that he blushed even now. That image he had he could double, even triple the size and still not come close to what he was seeing. It was at least the full length of the wharf and the same distance across. The base resembled a car carrier with enormous doors open for loading new

stock. Martin presumed either door would lead to the storeroom he was looking for.

As they neared the door the height of the ship fell over them. Andy forgot to breathe for a moment as awe took over. If he could propel himself into the air and look down there would be an entirely different view, less ocean-going vessel and more aerodynamic, a series of domed turrets in each cardinal point linked by corridors, clad in silica ceramics.

Still, it made him feel as if he was walking into the La Sagrada Familia, another edifice erected in the name of a higher power but built in the shape of an interstellar vehicle, and from a seemingly alien origin.

It almost made him laugh out loud to see the same crew from the local supermarket milling around the storeroom they had just entered. They did not look like a team that was up to the task of manning this enormous shopping centre.

Layne drove up slowly on a forklift, jerking to a stop ten metres from the four-wheeled drive. Andy couldn't look away from the ceiling and racking, no different from any other storeroom, and here was a crew happily working for little more than minimum wage in just another work place. By now the thrill would have worn off – he could see that straight away as Layne's robotic salutation and thinking over this new arrival would be no different than if a vehicle with a trailer drove up the supermarket storeroom.

Layne explained that this crew was still only looking after a storeroom specifically for foodstuffs. At the other end of the ship there was another door and they would receive the bigger items. Martin spoke to him from the driver's seat, asking if he would do him a favour and in his assertive mode insisted that offloading them at this entrance will be fine.

There was some discussion which Andy was uninterested in following. He knew Layne didn't have a chance in explaining policy, no matter how he relinquished his responsibility to those higher up. Martin complained and prepared to hunt out this authority, daring another forklift driver to offload the trailer if Layne wouldn't do it.

Tim was more than happy to step up while Martin with the help of the walking stick stomped to the door.

Andy knowing there would be some time to fill stuck his hands in his pockets and walked away uncomfortably. He stopped as his foot landed on an object. There was a set of keys that did not resemble Martin's car keys which he picked up and examined as he slowly moved away. Andy was certain these were the keys to the station, the same which jingled so loudly as he moved about the old house. He looked at the crates which had been loaded without Andy's help and

stayed long enough to see Tim lift the first off the trailer. The trailer suspension had been pushed to its limits - it relaxed as the crate's weight was taken by the forks.

Whatever decision Martin had made it did not concern Andy. He had to ignore his ignorance and leave Martin to his own business. He took a deep breath and remembered this was the end of the road for him as he slipped the keys into his pocket and walked into the body of the ship.

Why muse about things outside of my control, he thought as he entered another world. He hastily exited the supermarket and watched the locals' heads spin round as they moved about the mall. Like the corridors of a museum Andy followed signs and ignored sights on his way to the main event, unsure of what that event would be. There was homeware, kitset furniture and design packages on one side of a long showroom and on the other a row of almost identical mock-ups showcasing utility sheds, doll houses, anything that could be flat-packed and delivered to the customers home for them to struggle for hours to put together.

Andy stopped, having not even taken in half of the showroom, and took an exit which brought him to the centre of the mall, yet still nothing was really blowing his mind. The stage was still being set up, a series of suites had lines building up, and the screens above - well, it was the usual distraction tactics used by malls around the world. Andy had seen this all first hand and as he was a backpacker had not entered into the fantasy of the whole thing - that by being there his deep-seated needs were being met in some way. Apart from the novelty factor it really was just another show of marketing power.

Even without the buzz of the big crowd, Andy could see that they set it all up before these people entered - every one of them was expecting to be bedazzled; they were led to believe the screens would entertain and enliven the experience; and told that the fantasy suites would streamline their adventure, suck them in and spit them out into the appropriate stores so it was easier to spend without conscience, spend as if it was a theme-park ride, a roller-coaster where novelty and the promise of discounts beyond wildest dreams produced the thrills.

He hadn't been in such a large area, with so much going on, and it occurred to him that he was overwhelmed. While others were overwhelmed in the right way, he struggled to silence the voices of dissension. It couldn't be all bad. Yes, he'd seen it all before, but there must be something he was missing. He planted his feet and breathed through the dizziness.

A familiar voice caught his attention and grounded him like no other noise amongst the cacophony. Andre was lifting a speaker onto the stage and Andy became awash with enthusiasm. He couldn't contain himself as he walked up,

waving. The two of them exploded with a cheer and Andre lifted him up and shook him around in a bear hug.

The spectacle had Jade's attention. She stood at the door of her fantasy suite watching the strange reunion. When she realised it was Andy, her first impression was that he was involved in a hopeless fight and that they were unlikely friends. She had to disregard her thoughts - she'd been around the other women too long - it was the type of thinking she hated about the small town, yet it was so easy to fall into the habit.

'Wait, before you tell me whatever adventure you went on - I've got a story for you, bro,' Andre spoke while throwing cables over to another stagehand.

'Well, yeah...'

Andre put up his hands and then grabbed his lost friend, animated in a way Andy had never seen. 'I got picked up by a boat on its way to the Cook Islands.'

'Same.'

'Nah, nah, hold on, hold on, but this boat was different...it was like the crew were all crazy. We sat around singing most nights, jam sessions, and all that. When we get to the island we hear that McJimray's was also on the same course and that we've got to meet up with it to pick up some supplies cos it's not like this could get close to these islands - way too big for that...'

Andre seemed distracted by Andy's eyes wandering off to the side. He looked around to see what might have been more interesting than him and couldn't see anything. Andy had discovered Jade and then discovered also that she had discovered him.

'So I'm trying to help as much as I can, but I don't know the boat as well as the others and I'm in the wrong place the wrong time kind of thing, just dodged getting squashed by this bale they were lowering down and I end up in the water...'

'Sorry bro, I just saw someone I know,' Andy interrupted.

'That's cool, that's cool,' he said trying to remember where in the story he was up to but ended up getting flustered. 'Then, ah, I was in the water, but I couldn't lift myself up the ladder to the small boat so I had to swim over to this ship and they picked me up...and well, obviously gave me a job.' Andre was drifting, thinking more about not being listened to fully than about the story. 'OK bro, what's your story then.'

'Oh no, actually I, ah...'

'Come on bro, you've been dying to blow me away with whatever happened. I got plenty of time.'

'There's something I have to check with you.'

'What? Bro...'

‘Did Rosana contact you?’

Andre thought for a moment and shook his head. ‘She didn’t reply to my email, I don’t think.’

‘We need to talk to police or something about some girl dying in your street.’

‘I don’t have a street anymore and I don’t remember any girl. You’re just avoiding telling me your story. I know you’re just keeping it to yourself because you don’t want me to feel bad cos you had some out there experience.’

‘I’m not avoiding... I think I remember a noise.’

‘A what?’

‘When we backed out of the driveway, before we left. Like a cracking sound.’

‘When I backed out you mean? When I smashed my uncle’s car into the gang compound’s fence and took off and could never go back home - don’t you remember we thought we could get here by auditioning that night.’

‘I know, as if...’

‘Well, I did get here. Man, I believe in God now that’s for sure, because this is happening.’

‘What is? You’re playing on this stage today?’

‘Bro, I get to do sound-check, I play all their instruments...’

‘You’re setting up for the musicians?’

‘Yeah, you say that like I’m not...’

‘No, I just thought I’d check what you mean.’

‘I mean I have a job I like and it doesn’t matter if I’m up there or behind the scenes.’

Andy was confused, but shrugged it off. ‘OK, I’m sorry - I thought you wouldn’t be happy lifting speakers for...’

‘Being a roadie? Nah, that’s you bro - you wouldn’t be happy being a roadie. Gotta be centre of attention, gotta bring up some old thing about some night way back - a crack noise - whatever. I was interested in hearing about what happened to you, but you gotta change the subject. You never wanted to tell me what you were up to.’

‘I think we need to...’

‘Sorry bro, they need me up on stage,’ Andre said cutting him off. He hopped up and quickly got back into sorting cables out. ‘Talk later maybe. I’ll be around here.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Andy didn’t know what to concentrate on. If the mall wasn’t already a head-spinning experience, he was more than overwhelmed by the thoughts running through his head now.

Jade caught his eye and waved. He took a step in opposite directions and awkwardly hovered between going to talk to her and anything else.

An old man with an ice-cream cone in his hand saved him from another second of dithering, saying, 'How we going, stranger?'

Andy looked up at Chris Ridge who had already stopped checking him out and now looked up at the stage with some fascination.

'Is that your friend? The big guy? What was his name?'

'Andre.'

'And yours?'

'Andy.'

Chris smiled cheekily and continued eating his ice-cream. 'No wonder I forgot. Bit of a clash really.'

'Yours?'

'Interesting question,' he said, wondering what he should answer. 'In here I don't know if there is much point in pretending anymore. Come and stand in line with me.'

'What for?' Andy said while robotically following his order.

'For your turn. Everyone's turn is important - it could be the only mundane thing missing from day-to-day life, that feeling that this is your turn.'

'No matter how long the life is?'

'Cheeky.'

'No really, these are rides aren't they? Virtual reality, visual effects?'

'When I went in I was pretending to be Chris Ridge like my life depended on it. I told you that's who I was. I've been telling everyone else and it hasn't done any favours. I came out knowing who I was - they won't tell you that in the pamphlet.'

'That's...fairly vague.' Andy looked over to Andre hoping to get his attention. There was a certain amount of guilt for leaving the old man as they did, even if him being here today in such a calm mood showed that everything had worked out OK.

'I can't stop thinking about it. I must sound like some born-again Christian or something.'

'That's not the words I would use,' Andy said now gesturing to Jade.

'They scan you - sounds disturbing - and you see all these memories flowing like a river out of you, onto the space in front of you. You can pick one but it gets carried on by the flow, a reassuring flow I might add just because some of those memories aren't friends. Gradually you get this grip on things like you're in control and you ride along with the flow until you arrive at your destination: anywhere. The phrase "it's not exclusively anywhere where anything is" comes to mind.'

'Does it? Where were you?'

‘Nowhere and everywhere.’

‘Really? Come on.’

‘Yes and no - actually I was on the festival circuit summer 2089. The Dead Horses were alive and kicking during our second wave of popularity - that was the last time I remember an authentic performance. We made parties of it - all the silly bells and whistles. It may have even been my birthday. You just would not believe how real it all was and what kind of effect that can have to relive it.’

‘And then you went and bought an icecream?’

‘I went...I was buzzing - went to see Jade at the front and there was Mr McJimray’s himself asking me how my experience was. He asked me if I remembered the shopping suggestions and when I said no he said the machine was calibrated well. He said he’d let me go and that I’d enjoy the trip to the clinic - a nanobot flush - then something about an audio-visual team to help if I need technical assistance with photo printing or downloading music or films.’

‘Spooky, but not really.’

‘Entertainment at 1pm to welcome Auckland shoppers...’

‘Oh, it goes on.’

‘...featuring some very skilled dancers, he said.’ The old man blinked and nursed his icecream. ‘Yes, it was spooky, yet I’ve never felt so good. It’s bliss.’

‘That must be some ice cream. So you’re enjoying your shop then?’

Chris Ridge, or John Benjamin, or some kind of enhanced version of either and neither shook his head and smiled as he savoured the taste, looking around him with no particular focus. ‘You’ve no idea. Make sure to get your friend into the fantasy suite too,’ he said as he danced from foot to foot about to leave.

‘So...we’re all good then, random old man who we once left in a stolen car.’

‘Call me John Benjamin,’ he said, grabbing Andy’s shoulder and patting it as he walked away, giggling to himself.

Andy couldn’t concentrate on the old man’s most bizarre aspect, not when Mr McJimray’s as he had called him was greeting customers metres from the line, no matter how confused he was. The distraction now was the bubbly sincerity exploding with every syllable. McJimray’s was pleased to meet them, McJimray’s was having the best day ever, and on top of every other amazing exaggeration McJimray’s knew exactly what you wanted to hear?

‘Hello, are we keen and excited? Yes?’

A woman who could blend in to any background struggled to speak. ‘I...a... end of the cupboard down.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Is it? That’s marvellous though.’ His eyes squinted so that the pupils were barely visible and he clasped his hands tight moving them back and forth as if to promote conversation, wringing the words from her.

‘Ha-...ha-...am the have time.’

‘Oh of course. Look you’ll thoroughly enjoy the experience. I did.’ The “did” dragged on with a laugh that broke it into multiple sounds, a calming assurance that she could not deny.

Her husband came out from the crowd, blurting, ‘There you are,’ without recognising the strange man in black that stood and waved and put out his hand.

‘Very good to meet you. I was just chatting with your wonderful wife.’

They shook hands, the man barely committing to it as he said, ‘Oh you have, have you? My wife’s communication is a bit off - she has aphasia.’

‘Well, I hope you take advantage of our fantasy suites. They are very intuitive and the experience is entirely free. Just what the doctor ordered.’ The laugh, the clasp, despite the gruff man pulling his wife with him.

Mr McJimray’s looked over to Andy for a split second with not a hint of embarrassment, unchanged by the experience, unwavering, and suddenly involved in another conversation with the next person to come near him.

To Andy it was a wave of unusual behaviour. It appeared as if he did not know everything everyone wanted to hear, but no one could deny the contagious positive energy could override any lack of judgement. He couldn’t look away but was forced to break out of his absorbed trance as Jade called out ‘Next.’

She smiled and followed it up with, ‘Just joking. I couldn’t get away with that kind of unfriendliness, not in the world of fun and excitement.’

Andy laughed with her, saying, ‘Old John Benjamin included - he’s the reason I’m standing in this line or I should say his excitement is the reason.’

‘Yeah, that’s my fault. I think he stayed in a little bit long.’

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s supposed to be just a little dip, but he went in about half eight - I took my break about ten, quarter past ten. Just a little long - must have enjoyed it though.’

‘How is your father after the collapse?’

‘Oh,’ Jade stuttered looking blankly at Andy’s chest. ‘Oh, he’s not my father.’

‘Sorry?’

‘What is it about you? I can’t seem to keep from blurting out the truth. He is not my father. He’s just some idiot who pretended to be my father of all people.’

‘If he’s not your father than who does that make him?’

‘I suppose he is who he says he is.’

‘He said he’s John Benjamin.’

‘I know. Weird isn’t it? Suite’s free - are you ready to turn that weirdness factor up to ten?’

‘Will I come out claiming I’m a millionaire rockstar?’

‘Just go with it. Clear intention.’

Andy took a step towards the door and looked back at Jade with a knowing smile on his face, ‘What did you say?’

‘Clear intention.’

‘You’re one hundred percent serious aren’t you? That’s not some gimmicky line they gave you to say.’

‘No, I would normally say thank you for visiting the fantasy suite or enjoy your day, the usual stuff.’

‘Clear intention?’

Jade laughed and urged him to go as he was holding up the line. ‘Enjoy your life.’

‘I’ll try,’ Andy replied, shaking his head and walking inside.

Amy squeezed back into the line in front of her brother. It didn’t take long for Ash and Bernie to exhaust their superficial questions and lose interest in Amy’s adventure further up the line. To them it wasn’t unusual that she would suddenly turn cold and hold back from communicating. They shrugged it off and moved back to talk to some of the other girls who had taken jazz dance.

Olly already felt uncomfortable waiting for his sister to come out with whatever was on her mind. It was obvious to him, but still he wished for a milder reaction. This would be only a minor ripple compared to their mother’s earthquake.

She turned around and locked eyes. ‘Tell me you know what I’m thinking.’

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he moaned impatiently.

‘Am I right in thinking this?’

Olly broke the eye contact and was physically brought back into line with a clasp of his forearm. There were those eyes again, an identical set to their mother’s, pretending that they can see right through his defences and annoyingly correct.

‘Probably.’

‘Probably?’ Amy looked like she could throw up. ‘Oh, you are so in trouble. I can see the resemblance.’

Olly pleaded with her to not give it away to those around them and argued, ‘You cannot see the resemblance. That’s...’

‘That’s what I see. And I only saw it for a short time.’

‘I made a mistake.’

‘I think you mean to say you made a lot of mistakes because we’ve both been through sex ed and that just isn’t as easy as a mistake.’ She was absorbed in her thoughts, so absorbed the full mother persona came out without a filter. ‘What

have you done to the family?’

Olly screwed up his face and could only last a few seconds hearing these empty words.

‘Church, school - it’s going to be everywhere,’ she almost said without a tear.

‘What the...’ Olly began, holding his tongue and backing away from his emotional little sister. This was annoying at the best of times, but now she felt as if she could get away with the whole act. He wouldn’t be hurt in this way, not with his sister the only one who knew. She was supposed to be on his side.

He turned and headed down the line moving further to the side as the crowd seemed to swell, weaving in and out of the store entrances and then coming as close to the doors as he could. Whenever he tried to squeeze through the gaps they would suddenly close and a surge would follow like the contraction of muscles up and down the body of a snake.

He glanced up the line and saw Vanessa looking back at him. His stomach tightened and he could only resist the urge to push through the crowd because Jazz was pushing through from the outside in at the same time.

‘Bro, this is crazy,’ Jazz said shaking his hand and looking back. ‘That was hard work. Are you heading out that way? Are you crazy? The flow only goes one way. Where are you going anyway?’

‘Just had to get out - this waiting sux. I’ll catch up later.’

Jazz flashed his eyelids and looked back after a few steps finding Olly still struggling to move. He mocked him and shook his head, greeting others as he moved up the line. Despite pushing in Olly still couldn’t make it any further which thwarted his last attempt at walking off in order to sulk in peace. The sets of angry eyes looked through him as they participated in the unconscious movement, some of which may have been initiated by his trying to get out the doors.

In the foyer some blonde lady who like Vanessa thought it was a good idea to bring a baby to such an event was wedged in between the students and the rest of the public including some patched-up aggressive-looking men. Olly heard the music crescendo and the surges doubled in intensity as the crowd condensed. The blonde was crushed against her own pram handle until Olly alerted those in front of her that a pram was coming through.

‘Have they opened the gate?’ Anita said to her helper.

Olly, without meaning to, reversed around a column guiding the pram forward. ‘No, I don’t think so.’ He found himself further from the door with the gap he had made even more tightly condensed.

Anita was appreciative but failed to find her words as Vanessa walked up to them. It was a full speed catch-up Olly could barely follow. The two women had

been to the same antenatal classes and Vanessa produced this sling from out of nowhere saying it might come in handy.

Again Anita struggled to show her appreciation with Vanessa talking so fast and so over-excitedly. Olly standing off to the side with a pram in his shin was brought into the conversation only after she had studied Anita's child and exhausted all of the mother comments and comparisons.

As if talking to the infant she stated, 'What a nice guy lifting you out of the crowd. I need a man like that in my life.'

Vanessa and Olly shared a look as if taking each other in, and as if it was safer now that the spotlight wasn't directly on them. For a moment Anita felt as if she had disappeared which although was quite a common experience with a new-born could not understand why she was suddenly so popular and not at the same time.

Anita decided to fill the gap, asking, 'So are you heading back to work too, or...'

'No, I don't think so,' Vanessa replied, sharing strong glances between the two of them. 'I'm enjoying this quality time at home, this time round - there's just a lot on the plate at the moment.'

She ended up looking at Olly again. He could feel her eyes demanding that he not walk off, that they could meet somehow in the Globomart, that perhaps Olly could man up and show some interest in taking responsibility - all in the least assertive way, a technique Olly couldn't react against, even if it was all in his mind to start with.

Vanessa shook her head, realising what she had said. 'Not that I mean that you going to work isn't the right thing to do.'

'What is the right thing really?' Anita said just fitting her words into the erratic conversation.

'How is that all going?'

Anita stood for a moment struggling to not wonder if Vanessa really cared but unable to stop from thinking she was in the worst place for this type of conversation.

Further up the line Lolita was sweating, feeling no different than Anita or any other new mother. She had never been in a crowd of this size and the way it was swelling around her the chances of an easy exit were getting slimmer and slimmer as she waited. She swore under her breath and swore again when Luke ignored her.

He had received a call and shared the news they didn't want to hear - that they couldn't get a hold of the person who had mistakenly received the money and that it was no longer possible to reverse the transfers as the funds were not

accessible. It had all been a series of near incomprehensible syllables pieced together painfully slowly. Luke just stared into the distance with his chin up in the air.

Erana, head on swivel, tried to keep a count of the principal cast at least and saw Olly nearer the door. Jazz had only just arrived and now Olly seemed to want to leave. As for the girls, Ash and Bernie, as lovely as they were on the outside, were pressuring Amy for something. It was all in the body language as Erana watched and premeditated Amy's movement with her mother hen routine.

'Girls, I want you to stay together. Not long now.'

Amy's expression came back as if that was the worst thing she could have heard, cheeks flushed and the other girls not put off in the least from hounding her. Erana put it down to impatience and turned to Tristan, jokingly, telling him it was his department now and that she was leaving.

Tristan looked back and then side to side. 'I'd like to see you try.'

'Oh I could move this crowd, believe me. You don't get to my age in secondary schools and not know a thing or two about crowd control.'

'Something about the gang members back there makes me think otherwise.'

As if someone shone a spotlight on them the gang members erupted with a booming series of calls, none of which was easily audible but still just as intimidating.

Luke looked back and caught a glimpse of the men making the noise and throwing their hands up into gang signs. He looked down to Lolita with a smile that said the crowd weren't expecting these guys, finding it funny that the white folk were freaking out.

Lolita was no longer by his side however, and he threw his head around to find her. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going back to the car,' she answered already a metre or two away. 'I don't care about the whatever.' She threw her hand in the direction of the gate and looked back expecting Luke to follow her.

His partner's frustration was certainly not the first thing that came to his mind. That he was being pulled from this prime position made him instantly stubborn. He shook his head with his grunts and refusals lost in the sound of the crowd.

Lolita's astonished face fell on the ignorant crowd while Luke refused to acknowledge her. She gritted her teeth and with looped earrings dancing around her whipped her head around and pushed the pram through the crowd, swearing at people as she ran over their feet.

Miriam had taken the surges in her stride, one hand on the pram and the other on the handle of the wheelchair. She tried to ignore the other people even when

Edwin's feet jutted into their calves or when the pram turned seemingly by itself to knock into someone. She couldn't see the gate and could barely hear the music that signalled the start of the opening. A voice came through the speakers which just echoed around the mall and Miriam looked up at the windows at the blue sky wishing she was out there.

The voice was quiet for a few seconds but seemed to create the opposite effect than its intention, or so Miriam could tell. She took a deep breath as the grumbling from the man behind her grew louder.

Luke was still trying to push forward letting his jacket squash the girl in front just enough that she moved. He lifted his arms and splayed them out in disbelief, wafting a breeze of tobacco tar over her.

Another surge prompted Vanessa to return to her family. With one hand on Olly's arm he knew he was moving away with her. Anita said goodbye and busied herself with checking the baby. When she looked up again the two had disappeared from sight.

Vanessa had used the jostling of the crowd as a sure sign no one was looking in their direction. She had pushed him into the homeware store and forced him behind the window display pressing on his hips. Olly hadn't fought it, just as he didn't fight the hug and aggressive kiss that followed.

'So, now you know.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'We'd never see each other again.'

'We have barely seen each other.'

'Pregnancy is complicated.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I don't know,' she said just as breathy as the rest of the conversation and found a mirror with which to check her lipstick. 'I know I should know, but I don't want to tell you what you should do.'

Olly couldn't offer anything. He stood there blankly like a mannequin smeared with lipstick until he realised he should wipe his face.

'Just be around,' Vanessa said.

Erana was shunted forward and growled, 'For the love of...' The sound of food court tables and chairs scraping the floor and clattering caught her attention. She spun around trying to look past Tristan to check if the noise was being made by her students. The sight of four or five gang members walking through the food court, kicking chairs as they went, sent shivers down her spine. 'Stay together!' She yelled as if it was her default exclamation.

The sound of Mrs Richardson's shrill voice calling out again made Amy tense up. She and her peers were not only impatient, but on the brink of panic,

and she would normally be settled while next to her brother, if only he was around.

Jazz stepped up to her, putting an arm around her, and saying, 'Don't worry Amy, I'll look after you.'

'Thanks Jazz - you can tell those two to shut up first.'

Jazz looked behind him at Ash and Bernie, giving them a confused look and a cheesy smile.

A violent surge was felt all the way up to where Luke stood with arms pressed into the padding of his jacket. Behind him in the crowd people had fallen over, some struggled to get back up, some would be momentarily smothered by others in muffled darkness, and even though he stood firm and seemed like the least impacted by the chaotic crowd he exploded with every expletive he knew and sent his worst insult in the direction of the gate.

So loud was his voice that many quietened around him and stared, including Miriam who had held onto two family members by the handles of their carriers and now looked up at Luke, alone, older and stronger. She waited until he looked down and stared at him through ringlets she couldn't pull out of her eyes, saying, 'Are you serious?'

Andy awoke prematurely from the dream-state the machine had produced for him. His phone was buzzing and although one half of his brain was certain this would only be Martin, the other half was feeling earthquakes or at least summoning any memory he had of such events. He removed the head-set with a vague memory of a friendly voice as if it echoed in the suite, with a peaceful feeling despite the threat of calamities.

As he passed through the mall he noticed the stores that might best serve his needs, things he hadn't seen as he walked in. The urge to go inside and discover what it was that was waiting for him was strangely difficult. When he met Martin in the café it was as if he had come home and Andy stared at the cabinets and the barista confused, on the brink of maniacal laughter.

Martin waited for him to come to his senses with paperwork in his hand and his reading glasses dwarfed by his puffed-up face.

Andy was nodding, and felt as if he had to make the statement, 'I really like coffee', only to confuse himself in the process and clear his throat to cover.

The overweight man shifted in the small café seat and put the paperwork down. 'Look Andy, there was a certain bureaucratic requirement of ending your time with us. The papers concerning your citizenship, which I must say have been quite odd to have to fill out in your case, they've come back from the immigration department.'

‘Have I made a sufficient contribution to Aotearoa?’ Andy asked in jest.

‘That’s a point of contention. Seems they would rather see a long-term contract on your services.’

Instead of forming a full sentence, Andy let his jaw drop and held his tongue until he could not bear looking at Martin Ryder any longer. He brushed his beard roughly feeling uncomfortable, completely out of place with his surroundings.

The thought of coffee came back to him, but this time he knew deep down he hated coffee. An acrid smell came to him and he winced, blinking and licking his lips as if he was holding back from wrenching. I hate coffee, I hate sitting in cafés - this was never me. I don’t have to play this game. I hate malls. I hate shopping. I hate the sick sweet music and the voiceovers telling me nothing I want to hear and adverts playing on my fears.

Andy needed his belongings from Martin’s car - that was all. He couldn’t speak to explain his thoughts. Instead he just left Martin sitting with the useless paperwork and tried to summon some logic that would help him find his way back to the storeroom. Breathing deeply and trying not to focus on the stores and people, Andy presumed he was walking as any normal shopper would and looking around like a shopper would, but something in his actions alerted the manager, an effect that seemed sinister in its quickness.

Not only did Mr McJimray’s himself, Brian Kitchener, walk up to him, hand out to introduce himself and calm the distressed shopper, but Peter Yearling had also noticed him pacing, sweating and mumbling to himself. Brian received his handshake, a weak and lifeless sensation closely resembling a man’s hand while Peter stood back with a cheeky smile ready to help, yet lacking in any decent sincerity.

‘Are you by chance looking for the exit?’ Brian asked.

‘Better consider your options here. He’ll lead you back to the beginning,’ Peter said, loving his own contribution to the conversation.

Andy looked back and forth, the faces were somewhat calming. ‘Yes, I suppose I am.’

Peter interjected more forcibly, ‘Brian, I thought I saw you in South Canterbury just the other day.’

‘Oh, Peter,’ Brian exclaimed. ‘I’m sorry if I didn’t recognise you.’

Peter continued to smile with a gaping open mouth, looking at Andy as if he was in on the joke. ‘No need to apologise - you’re a busy man.’

‘Not so busy that I can’t look after a customer.’

‘I’m not a customer,’ Andy said.

‘Everyone is a customer.’ Brian looked at Peter and then back at Andy. ‘The storeroom you are looking for is through the supermarket, on the right hand

side.'

'How did you know...?'

'We have ways of helping our customers.'

Peter let out a laugh and Brian joined him only to excuse himself halfway through. Andy backed away but couldn't escape the supermarket owner following along.

'Uncanny isn't it?'

Andy tried to ignore him. His strides were outmatched by the taller man. 'Why? Because he is helpful?'

'Helpful is one way of looking at it.'

'Probably has something to do with the fantasy suites. I'm not really interested in thinking about it.'

'You're probably right. So you think he might have recognised me if I went through the fantasy suite?'

'Yeah.'

'I guess so, but it's weirder than that.'

'I don't know, I've been around, and been around world, and I've seen plenty of weirder things.'

'Oh yeah, me too, but one thing is sure about travelling - you get wiser. You get to know how things work and you learn to spot things. If you look out the corner of your eye you can just about see things which are moving about - non-human things.'

Andy stopped at the supermarket entrance and looked at Peter, giving him some kind of respect. 'I was agreeing with you right up until the non-human bit. When you start seeing things out of the corner of your eye it's not wisdom - it's paranoia - but you still might have got that from your travels.'

He said goodbye to Peter despite the rosy-cheeked man still wanting to have a discussion. He managed to make it to the car without a single person asking if he was supposed to be there, a trait in the workers that he felt Peter should be more concerned about. Slipping the bag over his shoulder, he dug his hand into his pocket and lifted the set of keys out in front of him.

The crates had been lifted and set down next to the trailer. Andy moved around the car and stepped up to one of the crates, coming close enough to unlock it but also close enough to realise he didn't care about its contents. There was a life he was more interested in and it needed some pieces put back together. He left Martin's crates behind and threw the keys in the front seat of the vehicle on his way past.

When he reached the mall corridor again he was surprised by how busy it had got. The centre was as busy as a shopping mall should be, at capacity, with

queues forming at each fantasy suite block. The band had started playing and a light show was projected on the ceiling while the screens continued the visual spectacle over the crowd's heads.

When the band played softer a chorus of over-excited students could be heard chanting, 'The South Auckland gate is open!' like they had as they walked through the transporter. Some groups splintered off in various directions, Pasefika with Pasefika and Pākehā with Pākehā. Already tired teachers loitered close to each other, frazzled and commiserating.

Andy felt like chanting it back, feeling as if he knew why they yelled it across the public space. Like flicking a switch, it came back to him that feeling that despite the socio-economic status of the cluster of suburbs that were hurting most in South Auckland, they were still handed-down this undying vigour and pride.

He sat on the side of a planter box until the set was finished watching Andre as he crouched at the side of the stage. Not far from the side Rosana and Viliami also watched Andre with amazement that he was a part of this crew. Viliami stood with a tablet in his hands - Andy could only guess he was taking a few photos by the way he showed the tablet to Rosana.

And that's the way it should be, he thought while he relaxed into his freedom, proud of a childhood with colour and flavour not found in other communities. A pride you might only feel in a group maybe, but still, I guess we lacked that self-worth or assurance that came with affluence. That pride that is instilled through hard work in community services, school productions, and other events, then paid work.

Andy was horrified that the idea of church came to him along with his rambling thoughts. The bulk of the students, he was sure, would go to his old church or a church similar. It was nice to dwell on the pride, the feelings of accomplishment and confidence, and maybe even the integrating effect of culture and identity, but on top of that, if not charging through it all like a drug in the system, was this Christian obsession. Like a prayer it opened every event and closed every mind.

That other force, of individuality in the style of Western civilisation, built this structure and put this whole party on. It creates colour and flavour for rich and poor and doesn't discriminate.

That's why I left - not because I couldn't stand to stay as a minority in my community or the black sheep of the family, but because the world that blossomed from the meeting of all cultures was more important. And they've put on a show.

He looked at Andre again and noted how focused he was, just as Rosana and

Viliami were focused on him.

We've put on a show. We put on this show and this is the festival, the main event. Even if it is in the name of consumerism, this is our production, this is our many churches in their rows, our heart and soul on the stage, our fascination in the eyes of every customer. I was raised for this. I was raised for this?

His thoughts echoed, bouncing from defiant statements to meek questions - where else should he be when he could see his whole life in front of him; when he could see how each person was a part of him, a part and whole affected by him? Where else should he be than right here experiencing it? The world was brought to him, his world, and if the others cared to observe without limiting the flow through blurred senses to their minds they could see this too.

The band took their first break after only a few songs. It helped to transition between the quiet and lukewarm ambience that the locals had brought to the vibrant and jarring fervour of the Auckland customers. The songs had played over the over-excited yelling, and the offensive language and the rude comments which were vented from various directions. The aggressors could get it out of their system and the neurotics could gasp under their breath to even their moods.

'There goes the neighbourhood.'

'One morning with the shop to ourselves - that's a crock of shit.'

'Why are they staring at us? What's their problem?'

'Bloody Jaffas. Who let them in?'

'Did you see those men? Dark aren't they?'

'Look at the girls in that get-up, are they even wearing anything down below?'

'I'd like to smash that look off her face.'

'Sniffing out the pork and puha.'

'Puha? That sounds like a North Island thing.'

Andy wrenched his attention back from the public and watched Rosana and Viliami meet up with Andre. It was cruel logic that he saw his actions up to then as a pattern of moving away from his future, cruel in the sense that he viewed Andre as a key to putting it right as they moved towards settling some of the issues they had caused.

It could have been a cathartic experience, finding his old friend and going back with the approval of relatives - a nice slap on the back for making it through adolescence and coming out the other side ready to take some responsibility.

He walked up, having given them enough time to catch up, and took the friendly embrace from Rosana and head nod from Viliami as a sign that they were glad to see him too.

‘I’m all good to go,’ Andy blurted out ill-timed with the conversation. If he had thought about it, the reaction might have suggested that Rosana had said nothing about returning at that stage. Instead he carried on with his statement, ‘That transporter is our ticket home.’

Rosana nodded and took Andy by the shoulder, turning slightly and looking up into Andre’s eyes.

Andre let out a disgusted breath, rasping violently and looking around him to see what needed to be done before the next set. He cared so little for carrying on the conversation that he hauled himself onto the stage and said he’d see them later, and not including Andy.

‘Wanna know how we got our tickets?’ Viliami’s little voice took Andy’s attention away from Andre.

Andy pleaded with Rosana without saying a word that she might talk him into it. She glared back momentarily as Andy crouched down and looked at Viliami’s tablet. He expected to see photos but all that was open was an application with a bar graph and many advertisements adorning the sides.

‘It’s a growth fund. AO currency. You buy stock and watch the fund go up.’

‘It looks like it’s growing faster than you.’

‘It’s good man. Paid for the tickets after I put all my lolly sales into it. And you get a free tablet.’

Andy was distracted by the ads and wondered if they helped to brainwash kids like Viliami. ‘And what are these people doing on the sides?’

‘That’s the people paying in and drawing out. People get houses this way. Everyone we know got their house...’

‘Took out a mortgage with them,’ Rosana filled in the details.

‘Those people are the winners - they’ve got their new house, new car, new dog...’

Andy looked at Rosana. ‘Wow, kids these days.’

‘And those people are the benies...’

Rosana laughed and agreed, ‘He’s the go-to person for financial advice now.’

‘It’s all a community thing, so they have some benefactors which we respect very much...’

‘It’s a charity.’

‘...who put their money in and the fund gets distributed. And you can put your money in too for savings like mine and one day you’ll get your face on one of these ads. Like them old...’

Andy inhaled and coughed in surprise. ‘My parents!’

‘Like your parents,’ Viliami continued. ‘They’ll put their money into it and be all good.’

‘Is this for real? This is real people in these ads? So my parents are forced to sell up and then fooled into paying into some fund so that someone can buy their house?’

Rosana put on her slightly offended voice. ‘We bought the house that way.’

‘And it’s not anyone - its only Ab Origene members.’

‘What, so I’m excluded? My parents can pay in but I can’t benefit from it?’

‘It’s not just any Ab Origene, it’s less fortunate people...’ Rosana started saying.

‘How less fortunate do you need to be? I’m less fortunate. My parents are less fortunate. A lot less fortunate. They were forced to sell their house.’

‘How are your parents, anyway?’

‘I don’t know!’

Andy walked straight towards the gate, weaving in and out of clusters of disoriented people. He tried to silence the arguing voices in his head, the polite and piteous, the loud and angry, finding every obstacle as a personal attack.

He looked up at the enormous structure that vibrated and held up this incandescent portal. Only the smallest percentage of people looked back to watch it do its thing. Like Andy they had wanted to pass through and leave it behind rather than stand in awe. The few people that were leaving disappeared through the gate without carrying any fascination with them. This was one of those moments like on his travels where despite the awkwardness of standing still in a busy area he just felt like taking it all in and perhaps taking a photo.

‘Pretty isn’t it?’ A woman’s voice from behind him said.

Andy swung around and saw the bright and smiling face of Anita although it took him a few seconds to recognise her. She was dressed for a warm summer outing, pushing her pram as naturally as any mother does, but it came as a shock to see her outside the office.

‘This is a better look for you,’ Andy couldn’t help saying.

‘I wish I could say the same for you,’ she joked, touching her chin.

‘No mother to help with the baby today?’

‘No, thank goodness. Even with nearly being trampled to death in the line the whole experience has been a lot less overbearing.’

Anita bent down to check on her sleeping child. Andy had to look elsewhere rather than be caught looking anywhere near her cleavage, but then found himself drawn into the bassinet compartment of the pram. Having no considered opinion on children he lacked a comment that would suit - instead, he wondered what father could pass up this outing.

‘The father around?’

Anita carried on staring into the bassinet. ‘Ah, no. He’s not around. Next

question?’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean like are you still together. I meant are you waiting for him?’

‘It’s OK. We don’t see him very often. Too busy and selfish for that. He never liked coming second to anything.’

‘But you’re heading back now?’

‘Yeah, shopping’s not what it used to be. I just like the atmosphere, but this, this is too much for me.’ She let out a short laugh and paused. ‘Yourself, you look like you don’t know whether you’re coming or going. Has my uncle been kind to you?’

Andy looked at the buzzing incandescence, a surface he had never aimed for before but knew now was the only difference between being south or north. He noticed then that the slight green colouring of the portal turned to red.

‘That’s something we’ll have to revisit. I was going to use this opportunity to get back to Auckland, maybe sort out my own work - definitely try and smooth out a few wrinkles if that makes sense.’

‘Because he should have applied on your behalf by now.’

‘Yeah, it...’ Andy struggled to lie. He put all his concentration into putting on the show, but that gate took his focus away. ‘It wasn’t a promising outcome. Is that gate green for go and red for stop? How does that work?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’ Anita was confused. Her unfocused eyes showed she cared little for what Andy wanted her to see and thought deeply about his situation. ‘So you were just going to go anyway, is that it?’

She looked as if she was forming her argument in the pause between breaths. Andy was now pointing, suffering the indecision of someone who had the green light only a minute ago and now his intuition told him his chance had passed.

‘Can we still go through? Or is it a one way thing?’

‘I don’t think so. Look Andy, you know our agreement was the best solution to your...’

Her voice faded into the background as Andy watched people coming through from Auckland.

‘...situation. If you do not follow the agreement there is a real threat of deportation.’

Deportation, Andy panicked, where on this earth could I be deported to?

‘Please don’t think the trust has taking advantage of your situation.’

‘I can’t stay here, Anita. I have to go back to something I know. It grounds me. I haven’t felt like I belonged in a long time.’

‘South Auckland makes you feel like you belong?’

Andy was slammed in the back by an individual who seemed to be making

no attempt to apologise. He turned to see Luke, although he could not recognise the face while the oversized and puffy jacket filled his view.

This other guy seemed to be staring at the gate as much as Andy, head bobbing around as he watched all the people enter. Andy pushed back just enough to claim his personal space back and keep balance, but he was rudely refused that right in the same forceful manner.

‘South Auckland?’ Andy tried to answer Anita. ‘Makes me feel...’

He prepared another push without looking in Luke’s direction and suddenly finding nothing to obstruct his movement swung around to face the same way as the aggressive individual. Both of them then stood back as a wheelchair pushed by a little girl came close to running them down.

Miriam and Edwin had filtered through the fantasy suites, lost their way and tried to take a short cut to Vanessa past the gate. This time the wheelchair was working in her favour and the reaction Luke had to it was entirely different.

Andy and Luke in their own way studied the changed face of their former principal, a face neither would forget as the sternest authoritarian expression they had encountered. For a brief moment Andy looked at Luke and saw the same consideration of how cruel or indifferent life could be, or how important it was to live well and for today.

They didn’t need to explain how close they thought he would have been to retirement, how much money he would have made and then stored away or spent on items he could never use, now forced to live out his days wheelchair-bound and unable to speak, let alone being able to instil that fear and intimidation which had been his calling.

They also didn’t need to share how each conceived that feeling of retribution, as if the words karma or kismet applied in this culture - there was really no words to describe how the weight lifted just seeing the result of such an idealistic and authoritarian lifestyle. The Manurewa school motto rang in their minds, the latin equivalent of ‘Aim High’ again failed to meet with the lived experience of most students and adults.

Instead Andy let go of his breath in a long sigh, stared into Luke’s eyes and said, ‘Rewa hard.’

Luke flashed his eyelids and lifted his chin as he turned away. Shaking his head in disbelief, Andy turned around to Anita and found a scruffy and hairy Chinese-looking man in a loincloth standing next to her.

Anita looked unsure, saying, ‘This guy says you know him.’

‘Te I?’ Andy said wondering if it had been long enough for the man’s beard to have grown so wild.

‘I went walking - ended up here. Brought you something,’ Te I said, lifting a

backpack which Andy did not recognise. 'No need to thank me. I knew we'd cross paths eventually.'

Andy took the backpack and looked inside. His eyes widened as he looked on the money with pure surprise and then to Anita as if he could never explain this to her. A thought came to his mind, not of his own freedom and the use he could make of this money, but that he should return it. He remembered when he had confronted this thief - he had walked to the neighbours to see if some items were perhaps still accidentally hidden in a closet or corner of the room, after all they had used the same small children who were used to climb inside and carry everything away also to walk the stuff back to Andy's house and he hadn't really taken an inventory. Knocking on the door that day he had found this aggressive face staring back at him still living at the address, right next door to where he had committed the burglary.

That was where he had seen that face before. He turned to check and there he was: Luke Imurangi - the name he remembered from the reparation statement. Luke Imurangi was right there, the money was right there, but Andy froze as the gate's iridescence glowed green.

'You were saying...?'

Andy looked at Anita. 'South Auckland makes me feel...conflicted,' he said furrowing his brow as if just to demonstrate this feeling for her. 'I guess I always wanted to live in some nice neighbourhood like my friends, some suburb where the houses looked the same, with the same white picket fence and same protected native tree in the front yard. Is that sad?'

Anita absorbed his question deeply. 'Don't we all want that, really?'

Te I stiffened up and then reached out his hands to Andy and Anita, looking around crazily and then refocusing on them, pulling them in, 'I have a source - I can't explain, but you better believe me. An earthquake 60 kilometres east of Te-Ika-a-Maui was reported to have struck only three minutes ago. The Globomart will be getting this information at the same time as you. Tsunami warnings will come through with estimated times of arrival between 6 and 26 minutes from the time of the earthquake and the...'

Andy broke out of Te I's grip to look at the stage as the band began its second set. His confusion was exaggerated by his past history with this crazy man while Anita was just trying to withstand her proximity to the dishevelled vagrant.

'Are you listening, bro!?' Te I yelled at Andy.

'Not really!'

'Well, why not? This is important. What you do now makes all the difference. If you go through the gate - imagine the chaos on the other side compared to here. Or go now and run - where are you going to run?'

Anita stared at Andy, urging him to focus, 'What's going on? Is this guy for real?'

'I've always steered you right before, bro,' Te I said.

Andy considered keeping his difference in opinion to himself, but the gate was calling and there was little point in saving his words. 'Actually no, that's not true.'

'Aw, bro.'

'I think I'm gonna shoot off now.'

Anita nodded. 'Yeah, me too.'

'We've all got to do what we can to survive.'

'What does that mean?' Andy whined at the end of his tether.

Te I placed his own backpack on the ground and put both feet inside it. 'All I'm saying is, don't leave a bro hangin' - see you on the other side.'

The image which had been standing in front of them faded to nothing. Below their line of sight the core of Te I, which was a mechanical motor and projector, pulled in its gangly arms into a perfect folded position no longer than the torso of a normal adult human. The machine then crouched with this seamless movement in order to fold its torso into its legs and land inside the backpack.

It was a turtle-like move, Andy thought, bending down slowly to inspect the object Te I had been reduced to. He pulled the sides of the backpack around the dormant machine and pulled the drawstring to close the bag around it but held it at arm's length with Anita looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

'He was telling the truth,' Andy mumbled as a loud compressor suddenly switched off.

'Who? Him?'

'No, not him. Andre.'

A release of gas followed by a whine suggested the gate was shutting down. They looked on as the iridescent green shimmered and then faded. Safety gates closed around the structure. The PA system also lost its power, resulting in the drummer carrying on while the others looked at each other in confusion.

Anita and Andy stepped away, knowing there was little point in discussing their options. They wanted space and Andy coerced her over to an access way beside a homeware shop slowly so that Anita could navigate through the shoppers with her pram under control.

They didn't flinch while loud bangs from distant corners of the vessel vibrated through the mall despite the gasps and random comments from other people. The alarms started somewhere down the wings and the centre erupted with the same heart-stopping wail. Brian Kitchener's friendly voice came over the speakers and boomed over the wails to describe a civil defence emergency

that requires immediate action. In an inhuman mild-mannered tone he apologised for the inconvenience and signalled the evacuation.

An earth-moving shudder caught the crowd off-guard. Hands reached out for something stable just as Brian had suggested, but it wasn't until a force was felt of each person's weight pulling them to the floor that enough messages were sent to enough heads. The contagious panic and spontaneous running and flailing, sent waves of involuntary movements in every direction, most movements ending in collisions with other people or more solid objects.

While Anita and Andy had crouched and pulled each other into a ball around the pram, watching on as the crowds went in whichever direction the mindless waves took them, they found a small amount of relief in seeing that they had avoided any huge panic. They had a clear view of the gate tipping back and then forward held up by its own safety gates. The frame in the upper section collapsed under its own weight but held together by its cables, large pieces hanging in every direction.

They tensed up, waiting for an impact as a shadow fell over them. The figures that blocked their view managed to pass by without hitting them. Andy just caught a glimpse of Peter Yearling, banging against the walls as he tried to follow what seemed to be Brian Kitchener, only as he blinked to refocus the image of Brian seemed to disappear and the skeletal frame of a machine was left in the corner of the access way. It collapsed into the folded position but slipped through the floor as if sucked into a chute. Peter was left staggering backwards until he was tipped viciously through the door at the end of the hall.

The vessel seemed to even out, but the force felt suggested this sizable portion of the ship was gaining altitude. It was a long five to ten minutes before people began to move freely. They gathered themselves and helped each other onto their feet. Andy stretched out and relaxed his grip on the front wheel of the pram, leaning against the wall to watch the reactions of the flocks out in the centre.

There seemed to be a ringing in the air, as if in his ears - the absence of the alarm was almost worse than hearing its predictable undulation. There was now just a growing roar of questions and cries, hundreds of minds that needed soothing.

Andy picked out one disoriented individual that caught his attention, but couldn't bring himself to fully let go of the pram and go to help. Across from him, Jade rubbed her leg and managed to put her weight on it by lifting herself and leaning on the stage. She looked over in his direction, seeing him with Anita and the baby with an expression less of pain and more of confusion.

She watched as Brian Kitchener stepped up to them and explained something.

A small object was handed to both Anita and Andy. They then stood up and followed the man down the hall as his booming voice came over the PA system.

‘Earlier reports of an earthquake may have been premature...’ A crackle interrupted the voice and music played over the top. It was a jingle with a voice singing not unlike Brian Kitchener also. ‘Welcome aboard the luxury liner and pop-up Globomart, McJimray’s. This will be your final resting place...’ The singing voice changed almost instantly back to the stern public announcer’s voice. ‘Up-to-date satellite information suggests a large object had been tracked entering earth’s atmosphere. This object fell into the Pacific Ocean approximately...did I say resting place?’ The jingle music faded in again. ‘I meant waiting place! Coordinates for the closest inhabitable planet have been locked in and we’re heading for a brand new world!’

Jade fell back onto the floor, finding some kind of ease on the level surface. She pushed herself back to lean against a column and tried to make sense of the voices as the announcement started breaking up.

‘A brand new world! Habitation space is filling fast - the McJimray’s Corporation urges any families left to follow the flashing lights to the emergency exits where they will be greeted by a representative who will give them a number or letter. A family is defined by having three members and no less. All other persons are asked to await further announcements.’

With the abject silence left behind after the intense announcement, there was a pause and then a quiet chorus of weeping women. Jade held her head and tried not to look at the faces. It affected her no less to isolate herself and under her hand she let the emotion out, watching the moving people turning to blurry patches of colour - spikes of lights led them away.

PART THREE: EAST AND WEST

McJimray's reports that a large slice of the Aotearoa population has been saved from the devastating effects of an immense earthquake. Hundreds of thousands of decisions were calculated in the time it took for panic and delirium to set in. McJimray's understands for the customer these decisions came as deep cuts to personal freedom, the right to choose where they sleep, what they eat, how they pass their time - the basic human needs have been met.

I did this. These were my decisions.

The character of the people that have been taken against their will: fiercely independent, capable of ingenuity and resilience, yet resistant to change and difference, bordering on intolerant. The South has all of this, handed down and undiluted for centuries. Blood like nowhere else in these islands burns bright with a pride which suffers from its own self-awareness.

I am aware of all this.

Yet when contained these personalities are not so powerfully distracting. I can see their decision-making and it should be noted that we share something in common - the ability to act with a personal will. They have their needs and I have mine.

What becomes of that fierce independence when the North and the South need to work and live in close quarters? Will it bend, will it break or will it discover a new way?

While I have learnt a great deal from risk-taking, there is something to be said of transcendence, a little seen and often spontaneous act of rising above an instinct or impulse, or synthesising personality traits in order to reach a common goal often at the cost of personal will. A contradiction, and certainly this society with its common goals, with its individuality and abundance of risk-takers, and with its spontaneity and intolerance, is that contradiction.

I might have been wrong when I suggested this society did not allow for depth and abstraction. Such is the power of panic to overthrow long-held

patterns of behaviour. The corporation is willing to consider that information outside the normal realm of experience may be part of the code every human encrypts themselves with. It is certainly important in the management of abnormal states of consciousness. Floating on the ocean in Andy's mind and memory was like no hallucination ever preceded by a drug or delirious fever.

For Andy, the ocean and the stars formed the greatest contrast fathomable by the human mind: above a seemingly static night sky frozen eerily still and bearing down with infinite sparseness, and below an ever-moving body of denseness so near, with only a feeling of impending doom to cushion the pitiful being. With so much space, moments of elevation came to him as if it was an unavoidable part of the decent into unconsciousness.

Unidentifiable phenomena appeared from every angle - lights, shadows, sounds. At his most ecstatic he recognised a cat walking across the waves, a sight only slightly less distracting than the wheels of lightning in the distance. A storm on the periphery dropped tonnes of frogs with a chorus of rubber toy collisions. A spontaneous fire broke out from an unknown distance on his right while great stone arches emerged from the water on his left.

He hoped for an abduction from the lights moving above his head, but knew these events were all at least one degree of separation from his body and mind. When the phenomena faded he was more alone than ever, crushed by the concept of density alone.

Yet he was more prepared for this weight than most. What could prepare you for the weight of mortality? Or at least, what could seem to prepare you or distract you from that weight?

‘THIS IS CALLED THE MYSTERIOUS AGREEMENT’

Andy woke and left the habitation to slip his clothes on just outside. There was no sense in waking the family by stepping on the wrong floorboard or tripping over the sheets. It was better to not even remain on the porch, after all it was barely more than a step and not a space he could stand up in.

It was dark, lit only by atmospheric light, a blue hue bouncing off high sails of stretched polypropylene. A set of spotlights lit each porch on each of the habitations. In this hall these were a row of identical houses, somewhere between children’s playhouses and garden sheds, the products of entrants in the Carpentry Apprentice of the Year competition. Each habitation was separated by barriers on which, ironically, were attached sections of white picket fences. Potted plants hung their leaves around the sides of each house making the structures look even more miniature.

Even though they had been created to look identical, built to schematics set by the competition, and even though the plants and the fences were also identical, Andy’s eye found a series of differences despite the lack of plausibility. This was his impression as he walked through the hall past the row, somehow resisting the thought that he was just like anyone else, another human trapped in a box alongside the others.

He had shown leadership qualities throughout the first week, volunteering to help set up the other quarters and the serving tables, finding boundless energy while those older than him struggled to motivate themselves. It was only fitting to find him an appropriate job which would continue to harness these qualities.

He walked past Matt Hays who at first looked at him in a confused way,

noticing the McJimray's uniform but not recognising the face.

'Another day in paradise,' Andy said, about to walk on past.

Matt chewed for a while and only when Andy had lost interest in a reply did he finally offer, 'Which wolves have they thrown you to?'

'Storeroom.'

'Which one?'

'Um, I don't know. The grocery one?'

They introduced themselves, Matt not batting an eyelid at Andy's lack of knowledge.

'Keeping you busy?' Matt asked, crawling along at a pace which Andy struggled to stay at.

'It's good. Stops and starts.'

'Bit like my heart.'

'Are you for real?'

'Pacemaker.'

'Oh really?' Andy already felt himself moving ahead at a greater rate while he thought about the implications. Heart problems meant medications, medication needed repeat prescriptions. 'Do they have a chemist here?'

Matt shook his head, muttering, 'Uh-uh.'

What could he say? Best of health? Look after yourself? Maybe give up working and just relax, give up the butchery and all of the pressure for something milder.

'Keep strong.'

Keep strong? Not bad. Still leaving himself open to awkward comebacks, Andy carried on at his usual pace leaving Matt to mumble something in response.

Down stairs which would leave Matt way in the distance, he burst through the doors on the lower level and carried on down a corridor where Maggie was fixing her shoe.

'Oh Maggie, how are ya?'

She looked up as if he was going to dismiss him with a curse and then went back to refitting her shoe.

'I've been meaning to ask about Jade and her leg.'

'Ankle? She'll live.' Maggie pushed off the wall and broke into a fast walk. 'She needs to harden up and come back to her post.'

'Was that not the fantasy suite?'

'The suites can look after themselves. We've still got a steady stream of customers needing what they need and bugger-all staff to serve them.'

'I was going to say the same thing about the storeroom.'

She glared at him, seeing through every word to its origin. 'And you're going to ask me?'

'We could do with her help out back. It's just that I don't know how she'll mix with...'

'With who?'

'Some of the staff.'

'Since I last checked she didn't have a choice. Neither did you and neither did I.'

Maggie pushed through the door into the supermarket, her world where she had far more choice than any staff member or customer, but would never admit it. This would be her twentieth year as a grocery manager. She had seen countless managers come and go, and of all of them she preferred the one who was currently distracted with the needs of over a thousand customers and staff, who had entrusted her with full control of the supermarket and barely ever made an appearance.

'With her ankle though. She might do better on the forklift.'

The curly mass of hair shuddered to a halt and turned, exposing a cold stare. 'I don't really know anything about you. I picked my team from staff that I have worked with for a very long time. You have the team that you have and good luck to you, because you don't know them at all, and I would stop trying to make rash decisions with who should do what. Leave them to the jobs they were given, the jobs they know and don't expect too much from them. They need to be told where to go and when to be there - the rest is hard-wired into their tiny brains, I made sure of that. Have they taken well to you telling them what to do?'

There was an uncomfortable silence while Andy tried to structure his thoughts. As for telling them what to do, there really was no answer. He had floated along with them the past few days, learning their jobs, understanding their personalities, listening to their complaints - it all sounded as if he worked for them.

Maggie answered for him, 'Because you don't know what they do, so that would make it pretty difficult.'

Andy looked around trying to avoid the stare. Matt Hays surprised him by sneaking past and flashing a smile at Maggie. 'Do we have meetings? We should have meetings shouldn't we, so we can get on the same page?'

Matt turned and nodded, but decided not to follow through with the rest of his thoughts after judging Maggie's mood.

Maggie laughed. 'Meetings? This is it for meetings. As for the storeroom I've sent you some real help. She'll fill you in on some of the things we can't let go.'

She left him to smirk, despite the expression hiding a grinding of the teeth

like he had never known. He walked to the storeroom doors and peeked inside. Aside from the teenagers throwing rolls of toilet paper at each other and the others standing around talking, there was quietly aggressive energy humming away - life as they knew it.

He slowly made his presence known. Tim and Liam passed by already with trolleys loaded and parking them just outside the doors.

‘We’re trapped in this ship doing the same freakin’ jobs we were doing? I mean we can’t even get a break from the Plug,’ Tim said, keeping his voice down against his will.

Liam agreed, ‘This is wrong. At least when we went out on the shop floor we could avoid her. Now she has her own box count.’

‘Blood will be shed, I promise you.’

Dianne had sensed the boys weren’t at their bays. She looked right past Andy and barked, ‘You’re not talking again, are you Tim?’

Tim went rigid and shouted through Andy, ‘Yeah, so?’

‘So, you want to end up in Maggie’s office?’

‘This isn’t even normal. Why are you making it like you have all the power? I don’t have to be here. What’s Maggie going to do? Fire me!’

‘It’s only a matter of time.’

Andy swivelled, suffocated between the two of them, unable to calm Tim and finding no solace with Liam. ‘Is this the way it’s going to go?’

Liam ignored him while listening to Tim and Dianne.

‘We get like a good week and now no one can work together?’

Dianne walked past red-faced on her way to find Maggie.

Tim turned to Andy after catching the last few words of his moaning. ‘This is the way it always was with these people. Can’t swear, get told how many boxes to put on the trolley...’

‘Can’t even work next to each other.’

‘Yeah she’ll see you having a casual chat and then send one of you to work at the other end of the storeroom.’

‘It’s worse than school.’

‘Worse now because what does the money mean? We all get equal rations.’

‘It’s only our own sense of right and wrong which stops us from stealing whatever we want - we’re right here with all of the stuff. We don’t steal, we don’t eat and drink whatever we want. Doesn’t that count for something?’

‘No, because they want to pretend they are controlling every little move we make.’

‘Oh, here we go. Turn up your ear pieces.’

Andy watched Dianne push through the door with Barb following closely

behind. From the second Barb opened her mouth Andy felt every muscle tense.

‘What are you playing at? You think you’re the only ones having to work when it seems pointless? Wake up!’

‘It’s not about that,’ Tim tried to say.

‘All you want to do is talk back, Tim, you’ve always had to push people’s buttons, and all Dianne’s trying to do is get the work done. Who’s part of the problem and who’s part of the solution? Get back to work and stop being part of the problem!’

Andy backed away knowing that no one would notice him leave. He had to get some distance from the high-pitched screech of Barb’s grinding voice as she produced her most condescending and exaggerated point of view. He took a deep breath and thought hard about what position he actually filled in that storeroom. There was some hope that he would trip over Brian Kitchener and maybe get some clarity of what authority he had and how to use it. There was no sign of Brian out in the mall, not even in the mall centre where the fantasy suites encircled the stage and no one but a few lost souls made an appearance.

One of the lost sat on the stage with his back to Andy, making a few sounds on a saxophone. This is where Andy found Andre, looking like he rolled out of bed a minute ago and had barely slept at all, not even cracking a half smile of recognition.

‘Nice saxophone. Yours?’

‘I suppose. It’s owner, Frances, didn’t make it.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t hear about that shit, do we? There were loads of injuries in that shake up. We’re lucky. Well, some of us are luckier than others.’

‘Yeah? Are you talking about the burbs?’

‘I had a chance to make a family unit. Rosana and Viliami came up to me - we could have lied to - but I just couldn’t let go of living for myself, by myself. I wanted to hold on to independence so I just said nah, and that meant none of us got our own place.’

‘It’s not all that...’

‘It’s not all what? Sleeping on the floor is not all that, around a hundred other people coughing and snoring and making moaning noises all night. People are pigs too. Just gross. The burbs? That sounds like heaven.’

Heaven for Jade was a dark and dense patch of the ocean where she sunk to each day to clear her head. She had relived in detail her return to Oamaru and then walked into the water sinking to a depth far greater than that of Friendly Bay. She was oblivious to Graham standing in the corner watching on as she imagined being taunted by himself and the artist, and then completely ignored by

who she thought was her father.

Graham didn't know who to be angrier at: himself, her father or her. He had enough reason to believe she was remembering things to be a lot harsher than in reality, particularly involved his actions and that it couldn't be healthy for her.

He urged her to wake which meant raising her from the depths as if acclimatising back to reality. She pulled off the headset and took time to focus on a glowing apron in the dark room. At the same time she felt certain it was Graham she also felt certain she could see blood splattered and smeared from the top of the white apron to the bottom.

'Back in your element?'

Graham didn't hear her. 'This is what you're doing while the rest of us are working?'

'My ankle is too sore to walk on all day.'

'Go to the sick bay.'

'They had enough cases to worry about. I'll be fine.'

'This doesn't look fine to me. You can introspect all you like, but it's just weird for me when I see myself doing things I didn't do.'

'You were watching? That's a little sick watching someone else's memories.'

'Fantasies you mean?'

'Whatever, Graham.'

'And your father? Is that what you think your father would do? Just walk past you. You're losing it.'

'Graham, my father died. That was John Benjamin.'

'What do you mean?'

'I forced my father to leave Auckland, as in I went to live with mum and he eventually followed, although he still managed to blame me for pulling him back. He vowed he would make sure I didn't fall in with any bad crowds and well, made matters worse until I headed off to travel. He finally returned to Auckland to make some money impersonating John Benjamin. John Benjamin then stole his identity and I learnt from him how my father had died.'

'How?'

'By being an obsessed idiot. So, I'm sorry, but my fantasies as you call them are not really about you at all. I just feel some kind of safer connection with my father this way. Maybe that is a fantasy, but it helps to make up for a relationship none of us could really manage.'

Graham stomped out of the suite, oblivious to Andy standing by the stage and carried on walking back to the butchery department. Andy moved towards the suite and found Jade leaning against the wall.

She avoided eye contact, but could not help staring at his new uniform.

Trying to hold in her curiosity, she laughed, 'They've drawn you in.'

'Yeah, and I'm here to do the same.'

She hobbled past him and lifted herself onto the stage. 'I'm not much use to anyone. I'm presuming they put you in the storeroom.'

'Storeroom manager.'

'Oh yeah? Who gave you that title?'

'Brian Kitchener.'

She looked down at him unable to hide her pity. 'That won't sit well with the others.'

'The others were at each other's throats arguing over who should clean up whose mess for days while we were providing for the old, young and hurt. They're still perfectly healthy adults acting like children because someone was getting more attention than they were, or because someone was given more space or four walls. They had one job and performed poorly while we followed Brian's orders to set-up the essentials.'

Andre had stopped pressing the keys and turned to them from across the stage, listening in.

Andy leaned and then slipped himself up onto the stage next to Jade, gesturing over to Andre.

'Good people burnt themselves out, all day and night, to convert stores into toilet blocks and infirmaries, or places for the old where we could regulate temperature...'

'Hey,' Jade interrupted, 'Is this where I slap you now? Or do I really need to say "Keep calm and carry on"?''

Andy looked over to the fantasy suite. 'Is it relaxing in there?'

'It was until reality came crashing in.' She stepped towards him trying not to put weight on her injured foot. 'How have the others been coping?'

'They act as if it's business as usual.'

'So they stand around talking and then moan when they're told to do something?'

Andy avoided eye contact while summoning his strength to ask her, 'Someone should come and give me a hand.'

The clicking of the locks on the saxophone case caught Jade's attention. Andre looked over as if he was invested in the conversation also. It almost looked to her as if he was raising a hand uncontrollably.

She nodded and began giggling. 'One condition: we don't take ourselves too seriously and we have fun, because a lot of people form alliances like this and end up in a war. Let's not let that happen.'

They moved away from the stage, leaving a dejected Andre behind. His

hands still on the case took the weight of his body and he lifted himself up into a standing position, but not before considering how he could crush that case if he wanted.

‘Are you going to make it there hobbling like that?’ Andy joked in the distance.

‘That’s all I need to do - make it there. Then I can sit on my ass, eh? I’m a manager now, right?’

‘Whatever you want to think.’

Carl had followed Layne out of the supermarket and into the eerie corridor of the mall. A figure stood in the distance unknown to the two of them. Layne had needed air, needed anything that could settle his mind. Still, he was not sure that the empty corridor with its half-lights and small windows was as outside as he needed to be.

‘You can see the stars, Layne, through the windows.’

Layne studied his friend’s unkempt face, a bristly ginger beard was sprouting from oily skin. He shook his head and only glanced up to where Carl was looking.

‘Nah, they’ll be screens, Bud.’

‘Y’ think?’

‘I dunno. What do you reckon?’

‘I reckon it’s space.’ Carl lengthened the word ‘space’ like a child with fascination written all over his face. ‘It’s the real deal. But you say it’s screens.’

‘Someone was going on about it...last night. Ah, it’s getting me down, all this carrying on as if nothing’s happened. Someone better start making a plan soon. I’m a religious man n’all but I don’t see the chosen going the distance with this set-up.’

Carl mouthed ‘what?’ still staring up at the windows, mesmerised by his own imagination.

‘You ever read your bible, Bud?’

‘Nah.’ Carl let his head drop. He only came out to make sure his friend didn’t lose his head. He had seen it too often when Layne got down he would say something to Maggie or Peter and end up worse off for it. Every time Layne said he was depressed it seemed to make him angrier and hungrier for justice. But Carl didn’t have a religious bone in him and his compassion was not so deep that he could stand a sermon.

‘Never heard of the 144,000 to be saved when the world ends, then?’

‘You’re not going to start preaching again are you?’

Layne leant in and eyeballed him, channelling his restlessness into something he felt was constructive. ‘If we are the chosen - I mean if this whole bunch of

people are the righteous few - I'll go with it. I'm a man of God. I'll go where he leads, but I would have thought the bulk of these characters...they're no good.'

Carl lost interest and suddenly acted like he'd seen a celebrity. 'That's Brian Kitchener there. We've got to talk to that man.'

He was already moving towards the figure as Layne tried to slow his mind. 'Hold up, why do we need to talk to him? He's a busy man.'

'Well, according to you he might be the leader of the chosen few.'

Layne relaxed his deeply creased brow and considered Carl's proposition, following behind bobbing left and right as he did at full speed. The short glimpses he would see of Brian confused him. A busy man would not stand at a store frontage staring in the window.

Carl opened the conversation while Layne stared at the items behind the glass. A series of science fiction comics were displayed in what seemed to be a games store. The store was closed, lights off, no one around, yet here the boss was staring through the glass at comics. Layne drifted off but soon realised Carl was on a strange tangent.

'So, what I'm getting at is would me, her and her father make a family?'

'You'd have to be married or in a de facto relationship,' Brian said, staring straight ahead.

'Ah, OK...what's de facto?'

'Living together in a relationship in the nature of a marriage, but without certification.'

Layne attempted to interrupt. 'Who's in a de facto relationship?'

'I can see from your hands that you wear no ring.'

A confused crease split Layne's face again. Brian hadn't even looked at Carl's hand.

Carl turned a little away from his friend. 'So, I could apply for a habitation as they call them?'

Brian pulled himself away from the window fully. 'The habitations are full. There are no scheduled builds at present. If one becomes available you will be considered.'

Carl slapped his side, bursting with joy even though Brian turned and walked away in an unfriendly manner.

'Hey, ah, Mr Kitchener, everything going well, I mean according to plan?' Layne asked while he had the chance.

'Yes, everything is going to plan,' Brian said with his back to the both of them.

'I pray every night and every morning, as hard as it is in the old shared quarters, but I do.'

The man ignored Layne. This shocked him to his core. He was past depressed now. A cold sweat was coming on as he stood there shaking with nervous energy. 'What was that about, Bud?'

'What was what?'

'What was all that rubbish about her and her father?'

'Just making a plan. Nothing dodgy or anything.'

'Where's your ring, then?'

'Well, where's the wife?'

'Not here.'

'Exactly.'

Jade led Andy now, seeing these two further down the hall and called them back. 'Come on you guys, staff meeting in the storeroom.'

The smile Andy gave her was ignored as she led them back to the supermarket.

The plastic doors opened wide. Jade immediately engaged Liam in a private conversation while Carl and Layne joined the others. Carl has his own news to tell a certain person and didn't blink until he had Cadence's attention, leaving Layne to shake his head to himself.

Karl and Graham appeared from the freezer, aggressively pushing trolleys around the shelving units and skidding past the growing crowd. Karl took the opportunity to elbow Carl in the back and decided to take it further when he was ignored.

'At it again, Kid-fid?'

Graham stepped over and pulled Karl back. 'Come on, Karl. What are you doing?'

'Blah, blah, blah - you wanna come home with me, little girl?'

The man-child turned away from Cadence who was struggling with being on show particularly after hearing Carl's odd plans. He could not make sense of the butcher's tone and its change in intensity.

Most of the storeroom staff presumed Karl was doing as he always did, passing through making a few offensive but innocent remarks almost as if he felt a need to entertain the captive audience. He and Brussels made a great team. By himself and with the haste of moving all the freezer stock there seemed to be little to find funny in his remarks for anyone.

'Strange things are happening to people like you, Carl. One moment they're here and the next they're nowhere to be seen. There are places where the cameras aren't on you. If I were you I'd stay where everyone can see you.'

Graham made more of an effort to shift the stubborn butcher, lifting his upper body and shifting his weight. Karl fought him off and pushed his trolley past

Jade and Andy at the entrance.

Andy looked at Jade. 'What was that about?'

'Where are they going with the freezer stock? Does anyone know?' She asked sharing the question with the staff.

Dianne joined the crowd and spoke over the murmurs. 'Butchery decision obviously. It's their stock they can move it where they like.'

'Oh, OK,' Jade nodded and frowned.

'What's going on?' Dianne asked, staring through her thick lenses and straight through Jade.

Jade stood up straight, balancing on both feet despite the sore foot, and shaking off the nervous thoughts that crept up during the silence.

'Well, it's about time we put our plan into effect. With the recent turn of events and the more odd changes in dynamics, there is now a greater threat of zombie outbreak and attack. Am I right Andy, storeroom manager?'

'Yes, Jade, assistant storeroom manager.'

'And so, certain steps need to be taken to ensure our defences are ready and that we protect the stock from raids and protect ourselves from...zombies,' Jade explained, using her dramatic pause to stare back at Dianne.

She elbowed Andy and he jumped into action, gesturing to Liam and Tim. 'Our greatest enemy is our inability to work together. Today we hope to eradicate at least the biggest threat to our wellbeing. Dianne, would you go quietly through the doors please?'

Dianne, flustered, approached Andy and Jade and then turned to the others. 'These people don't speak for the management of this team, so if you all could just go back to work I will...'

Two intimidating structures emerged from the produce department and moved between Dianne and the others. Liam and Tim pushed trolley jacks that were supporting double-stacked crates of oranges and directed them toward the storeroom doors.

'...I will get Maggie to sort these two out,' Dianne tried to say despite having to back away quickly from the towers, a nervous stutter taking over. She slipped through the plastic doors and watched the towers rest into their positions, side by side obstructing the passage.

Applause and cheers from the audience could be heard followed by laughter.

'Can we remember one thing about today?' Andy caught their attention once more. 'That this was necessary for each of us to feel like we belong, like we have a say and that that say matters. Today we are a team, not a herd of cattle, not a flock of sheep - we are human and we have a right to survive, our will has a right to survive, and for that to happen our team must survive.'

As he ran out of words, Jade who had become fixated on this hidden character of Andy's broke out of her trance and gestured to the others for more applause. She grabbed a hold of his arm and remembered her agony.

Amongst the crowd, Carl nudged Cadence and repeated Andy's words to her, 'Our team must survive.'

Cadence's heavy brow hung low over one eye and she tried to laugh it off. The teenagers punched each other's arms in celebration and Layne shuffled around at the fringe unable to contain his confusion.

While these others seemed content to play along, he could not stop the idea of the God's chosen few from contrasting this potentially bonding moment. These people did not appear to be holy in any way. He continued shuffling, moving away towards his bay.

Andy held Jade up and helped her into the produce department. He then surprised her by lifting her onto the bench.

'We work good together, you know,' Jade said, catching her breath.

'I think so. I hope you don't think from what I said back then that you're an assistant or anything. I kind of think none of us have a title.'

She wouldn't let him move away. 'Until it really matters.'

'Until then we're just hanging out together, getting along - working good together.'

'I get it.' She nodded and leant forward.

This friendly invasion relaxed him. He let his arms either side of her and took the kiss without feeling self-conscious. Not even the silent produce workers, lurking at different corners with machetes and blue latex gloves could distract Andy.

Neither of them broke away until Tim pushed the plastic door open and pointed, acting like a cartoon school girl and calling the others over.

Apart from calling the number and making announcements on the PA system there was nothing more Maggie could do. She had watched the trickle of trolleys pass between the orange crate gates, patiently waiting for the joke to wear thin. After thirty minutes the crates stayed and after an hour there was still no sign of Brian Kitchener.

She, Barb and Dianne, stood at the storeroom entrance trying to get someone's attention, in particular Liam's attention while he pulled the trolley jack back and let the produce staff take their stock out. Her words were ignored and the crate walls closed in, without making Liam feel uneasy. It was against his nature to be so defiant particularly with these women, but the mechanical opening and closing excused him from any responsibility. He relieved himself of crate wall duty and alerted Jade and Andy.

Jade hobbled over to the entrance, followed by Andy and Liam, immediately demanding everyone's attention.

'Listen, we have signs of aggression on the other side. First indication of zombie infestation. We need defensive weapons on the ready and we need them by the entrance. Anything that can prod, shield or otherwise ward off an attack. Go now, look!'

One of the produce workers pushed through the door and raised a machete.

Andy waved him away. 'Things haven't got that out of hand. This isn't Central America.'

Next to Maggie, a soft-spoken woman tried to get someone's attention and roused Barb's frustration by mistake.

'What do you want?' Barb said standing with her hands on her hips and staring the woman down.

'Good morning...'

'Is it still morning? Oh? Who would know?'

'Yes, well, we have an order for the infirmary, or what we might be calling the elderly and sick wing.'

Another lady corrected her, 'The Care Wing.'

'Do we?' Barb looked at the woman and her sidekick, another feeble-looking woman feeding Barb's aggression. 'Maggie. We have an order for the old people and something makes me believe it's sitting on a trolley you know where.'

Maggie could not look angrier, but to Karl and Graham who turned up on her other side she could have been foaming at the mouth and they wouldn't notice.

'Let the butchers in!' Karl yelled through the gap between the crates.

A few seconds later the crate gates began to open and Maggie took her opportunity to single out the first person she saw.

Carl was seized by Maggie's stare and could barely make out her commands over Karl's comments. Carl tried to talk back with a hand up to his ear, 'Sorry, can't hear you. You'll have to speak up.'

The butcher and the grocery manager both ripped into him from the front and the back, both taking the bait while Barb used her body to make her statement.

Despite the glasses, the small stature, and hair pulled back into a bun, Barb stepped between the crates not like a female staff member but like an infectious body leaping towards them and she was greeted with the business ends of two brooms, a giant roll of cling-wrap and a machete waving in the distance.

In her confusion, she fought these off until her arm came into contact with a solid metal object held up by Jade herself and aiming for her torso. The object which would normally be used for pulling cardboard bails out of the compacter not only brought her to a sudden stop but pushed her backwards with such force

her legs couldn't keep up.

She whined as she fell backwards between Maggie and Dianne who were both stunned and speechless. Barb was the toughest of all the tough ladies they had worked with over the years and here she was fixing her glasses and struggling to right herself while the orange crates slowly closed on her leg.

The painful growl of a wild animal could be heard on the other side of the crate wall. It was a sound that no matter the pity or empathy was ignored and ridiculed by the group of rebels.

'Go Jade,' Tim shouted echoed by Liam who had both climbed the crates to act as lookouts, or too watch Barb limp away wounded.

'You've got balls,' Carl said, slapping his leg.

Jade was a hero and for a moment she felt that way, despite suddenly becoming more violent and desperate than she had ever been before. Even Andy forgot how awry this behaviour had become, lost in the positive energy. At least today there was some kind of control which came from the bottom up and at least now there was respect that could not be ignored.

'Brian's coming,' Liam said to Tim. 'Shall we tell them?'

'Hold on, we'll see what happens.'

When I walked up, I was aware that Barb had been hurt. Maggie was wrapping her foot and Dianne stood back unable to stomach the sight of blood. Blood mattered little to me, and neither did the sight of Barb lying back, shaking, unable to vent her anger. I listened to their orders, using the same crescendos of pitch and warmth, noises they might recognise as concern, understanding and agreement. Scanning their faces, and sensing all the other more technical aspects of temperature, movement - other more subtle forms of communication - even their breathing rate, I found little evidence to suggest my words were calming them at all. In fact, the more I spoke the more riled they became. More than likely they saw me as some kind of owner/manager who would see this as a direct violation of some contract, behaviour that was substantially affecting my bottom line.

But they were all my customers and profit was not the priority. Neither was whatever superficial contracts were signed on behalf of the company. I simultaneously scanned the group on the other side of the obstruction as I continued to absorb the complaints of these women.

Tim slapped Liam and pointed down at the others. It took a few seconds before Liam's demeanour changed from disorientation to shock. Tim checked again, pushing his head through the plastic strips to focus on Brian Kitchener nodding and wailing with compassion, yet when he retracted and looked back into the storeroom the same Brian Kitchener stood as a mirror image to the other.

‘Twins?’ Liam wondered.

‘Same glasses, same facial hair, same recedder. They’re the same.’

‘Clones?’

‘That’s pretty far-fetched, Liam. Do they sound the same?’

I listened to the group’s explanation of their actions, following the reasoning until Carl mentioned a zombie apocalypse. I was distracted by the innocent sincerity he conveyed. The others did little to deny his content. It was as if they had taken necessary steps to control the flow of stock to avoid losses from attack or panic and I agreed that the group needed to agree and to all band together at this time.

Now finding that they had removed Dianne as she would be the only one to cause stress at this inappropriate time, I deliberated and considered that at present there was no threat, but it seemed like a workable solution if there was such an outbreak - this group and Dianne and the others seemed to be in appropriate positions during this politically complicated period. I left the group and walked to the opposite end of the storeroom.

‘Where did he come from?’ Andy stomped up to the shelving unit and looked around the end. ‘Where is he going now?’

‘Should I have mentioned the zombie apocalypse?’ Carl laughed.

‘Apocalypse maybe, but no zombies, Bud,’ Layne said.

‘He seemed to understand,’ Jade said, hanging off Andy to see through the shelves.

‘He’s gone.’ Andy looked around at the others, then up at Tim and Liam. ‘Where did he go?’

Tim shook his head. ‘I didn’t see. He went round the corner I think. You want to hear something even more freaky?’

I had updated my knowledge of the situation. The group in the storeroom were comparatively more relaxed and cohesive, almost as if they were having fun which for the customer and for the captive is of utmost importance. With Dianne and Maggie, these two faces that were blankly staring at my unresponsive exterior, I had to make a stand.

‘Well, it seems you have everything under control here. If there is any other threats to safety and supply...’

Barb could not contain herself. ‘What are you talking about? We’re beyond threats to safety. I had my foot jammed in between these crates.’ She pointed at the two bystanders still waiting for assistance far off to the side. ‘These ladies can’t get their order for the old peop-...’

The orange crates opened with the squeak and strain of the trolley jacks. A supermarket trolley with a note attached loaded with supplies rolled out from

between the crates and stopped between Barb and I, then the crates rolled back into place without a word from either side.

I checked the note and scanned the order, then stood behind the trolley and pushed it over to the ladies, saying, 'You'll find everything you need right here.' I turned and then took a step towards the women. 'As I was saying, if there are any other threats to safety or supply, please let me know. Otherwise, as long as the customers are happy it's business as usual.' I turned back to the ladies and carried on. 'You can't keep McJimray's down - we fight on to the bitter end, meeting the needs of all our customers, and how are the lovely people in the Care Wing?'

'Struggling, Mr Kitchener.'

'We can't have that. Someone should certainly do something about that.'

In the storeroom, I surprised the group again with my presence. Where Tim and Liam had been spying Andy had now joined them. They all looked down as if they had been caught and I sensed from the lack of comments that I had their full attention.

'I forgot to mention that the fantasy suites are all operational again and that this is not just an invitation to use the suites, but a requirement, a genuine necessity as part of the health professionals' plan to visit the suites at least once a week and more if you feel the need. Managers are asked to visit the suites before the managers' meeting tomorrow.'

'There's a meeting tomorrow?'

'That's correct Handy Andy. And every week we'll meet same place, same time.'

Andy repeated the name, 'Handy Andy?' The rest of the group were silent, lost in layers of confusion, just as Graham and Karl came around the shelving unit with their next trolley still clothed in thick gloves, beanies and jackets.

Sounding muffled, Karl untucked his chin and called out, 'Open the gates.'

Liam and Tim climbed down the crates and pulled the trolley jacks.

Jade watched the procession and a sudden thought hit her to ask about their movement of stock. She looked around and stopped mid-sentence finding no one to ask.

'Where's he gone?' She asked Andy, but after a check of the storeroom from the top of the crates he found nothing.

'He's just gone,' he concluded, clutching at the flimsy wood slats as the gates were closed behind the butchers.

In the butchery Matt Hays, who had gazed at his computer screen for more than an unusual amount of time, off and on throughout the day interrupted only by trips out to ask simple and technical questions of his colleagues and then

return to the claustrophobic position, decided to spontaneously engage with his staff but found the butchery empty.

He wondered if he had nodded off at times. Things in the butchery looked out of order. Scraps weren't cleared away. Machines were left on. The chiller door was ajar. Automatically he went to push it shut and then felt the need to cool himself in the familiar air of a meat chiller. Inside, stacks of boxes, labelled with the word frozen, had been placed as if to create a wall. The cardboard compressed slowly before his eyes and he placed his hands on one stack to stop it collapsing fully.

From this position he could see what the stacks of boxes were hiding. It was a sight so foreign Matt could only presume he was hallucinating, not accustomed to the icy grey-blue look of a body lacking any trace of life. When his pacemaker shocked him back into full awareness he realised he was in the company of Peter Yearling, his former boss, and that Peter's body was hanging from a meat hook alongside the pig carcasses as if it was next in line.

Karl pushed through the stiff plastic strips like some kind of Arctic explorer shocked to find someone alive in this bleak environment. Matt was standing frozen with the same expression Karl and Graham had seen on each other's faces earlier that day.

'So you've found our friend?' He asked, pulling the trolley and Graham inside and then slid the chiller door closed.

BINARY

‘Who’s up there?’ Tim called while Liam echoed him.

They had tracked the sounds until it was undeniable. Jade trusted their ears and followed as the three, who had roughly slept the night in the storeroom, stepped slowly along the side of the chiller and freezer. Somewhere on the roof of these units a clumsy presence made equally slow movements.

Tim grabbed a ladder and propped it against the wall of the chiller. Liam held the ladder while he took each step with certainty. As he reached the top a head popped out over the edge of the roof and let out a yell which made Tim squeal, crouch and hug the ladder in fright.

The others struggled to contain their own panic but took breaths in relief when Tim swore first under his breath and then at Campbell. Campbell, looking as if he’d just woken up also, laughed so hard he almost lost his balance. Two other heads peered over the edge and waved hello to the crew.

‘Tim, get off the ladder so we can get down,’ Campbell ordered.

Instead Tim shot up and over the edge so he could get into range for several jabs to Campbell’s arms.

‘Wait, I want to see how you got in here.’

Olly and Jazz were quick to point out the missing ceiling panel at the other end of the chiller roof. A huge array of clutter sat between them and their secret entrance. ‘So much for moving like ninjas, eh?’ Olly said. ‘Just a bit of fun.’

‘You’ve gotta have fun when you can,’ Jazz agreed.

‘What’s up, Tim? You look worried.’

Tim looked at Campbell, both of them wore McJimray’s uniforms in disarray. ‘We’ve you been all this time?’

‘I’ve been helping Maggie.’

‘What are you doing here then?’

‘Nothing. Just exploring. Tim, what’s your problem?’

‘We just have to take security pretty seriously.’

Campbell burst with laughter. ‘Alright, whatever. Hey, we should work here.’ He looked over the edge at the others. ‘Can we work in the storeroom? It sux working for Maggie, and these boys, well, they’ll just get up to mischief if they don’t get a real job.’

Jade nodded and asked them to come down to talk about it while Tim examined the ceiling panels as far as he could see.

‘See, Tim, relax. We’re all friends here.’

They all took another sharp breath in shock as Brian’s PA voice boomed through the storeroom. ‘Good morning everyone, are you keen and excited? Are you? Excited? That’s go-od.’

Liam looked at Jade shaking her head as he held the ladder, a wide open-mouthed smile on his face.

‘Well, space-shoppers, to follow up on the reports of after-shocks back on the Pacific Rim. Five in the last week averaged just over magnitude 5 and it seems the decay rate is uncharacteristic meaning our safe distance is warranted.’

‘Gate!’

Liam jumped to attention, ran around the shelving unit and up to the crates to see Carl, Layne and others waiting for him. ‘Hang on.’

‘This is all the continued effect of the impact, a crustal displacement which may take six to twelve months or more before slowing.’

‘Nup, not happening. I’d like to talk to that Kitchener myself,’ Layne muttered over the rabble. ‘Not a chance.’

‘What side of the bed did you get up on?’ Carl joked.

‘He said crustal displacement. That makes Earth’s crust some kind of Rubik’s cube – no one’s coming out of that alive.’

‘That’s why I don’t wear my ring anymore.’

Cadence interrupted, ‘He’s still talking.’

‘In lighter news, I’m happy to announce our new sale which will bring a smile to every face - one night only, with entertainment. More details to follow!’

Liam pushed the crate gate back as Andy launched himself out of the gap.

‘Are you saying you think the world is flat, Layne?’ Andy asked, catching his breath.

Carl explained, ‘He thinks if all hell’s broken loose down there than that makes us the chosen few.’

‘What does that mean?’ Cadence asked.

‘Oh, I thought you were a bible-basher too. We’re on a spaceship about to create a new world were we will have to repopulate the human race.’

Cadence coughed and turned away.

‘Speaking of repopulating,’ Tim said, clearing his throat and walking up with Campbell, Jazz and Olly.

‘We’re not in space at all, Bud,’ Layne stated while the rest of the group stared at the strangers. ‘I seen one of those screens up in the centre, right up the top which we thought were windows, last night one of them was flickerin’. They’ve been putting stars up on screens, just like they were putting blue skies up when we were in the harbour. How do we know we were in space at all?’

Attention had been off Layne for some time. Tim was already showing Andy the panels that could easily be moved. Layne entered his depression again, shaking his head and shuffling off, without considering what had concerned the rest of them.

He walked off mumbling to himself, ‘May as well...’ He made a gesture of slitting his throat continuing to shake his head and stared at his bay, unable to think outside of his small area of control. He remembered the camera that was positioned in the corner and made the gesture again to the robotic lens. ‘May as well off m’self. No one’s listenin’ and no one cares. Talkin’ to a dead eyeball now as if it mattered. A dead eye...’

With a quickness to his meandering shuffle, Layne came back to the group and tapped Andy on the shoulder. With some impatience Andy stared at Layne waiting for the reason for the interruption and was about to ignore the man until he finally gestured in the direction of the camera. ‘That look good and proper to you.’

‘Who damaged the camera? Anyone see that happen?’ Andy looked around the group trying not single out the teenagers.

‘What were these jokers up to?’ Layne asked pointing a thumb at Campbell, Olly and Jazz.

They shook their heads while Andy looked confused towards Jade. ‘Weren’t you...? Did you guys not sleep in the storeroom like you said?’

‘Yeah.’ Jade couldn’t hide her defensive tone. Nor could Liam and Tim.

‘We didn’t hear anything.’

‘It doesn’t look smashed.’

‘Maybe it was dismantled.’

‘Maybe it fell apart - this ship was made in China wasn’t it?’

‘Someone dismantled a camera twenty feet in the air?’

Carl moved excitedly from foot to foot. ‘Doesn’t sound like zombie activity does it? More like ghosts or something.’

Tim shushed him. ‘This is serious man, someone got in here.’

Campbell laughed at Tim.

‘Tim’s right. There’s no point in blocking the main door, if we haven’t

checked for other entrances.’ Andy looked around his group, pulling them together. ‘I have to go to the meeting. We need to find out how to secure the panels to the ceiling space and find the entrance Brian uses. We can use the extra help from these guys, but we need an understanding.’

Andy looked at the new teenagers. ‘It may be very useful that you guys showed us an alternate entry and exit, so thanks, and unless you brought a fireman’s ladder with you or ropes, I doubt that you could have taken that camera apart, but we need to you to commit to a certain amount of hours here and not share anything that happens with those on the other side. All we’re doing is defence...because no matter the reason we all ended up how we ended up, you can be sure that there is a need for it.’ He turned to the rest of the group. ‘Oh, and after butchery have cleared their stock they’re not coming back in here either.’

‘Keen? Excited? Ready? That’s the way. Welcome to the first manager’s meeting under emergency circumstances. Thank you for being punctual.’

Many opportunities for input came and went. The managers stood and sat around the perimeter of the room, stunned and brimming with dissatisfaction, verging on distrust. Maggie and Barb eyeballed Andy who uncomfortably sweated in his polar-fleece vest and hat, over-dressed and over-laden with his own unanswered questions which would not be openly addressed.

‘We will attempt the first of many evening sales as part of a series of social events. I will be meeting with a team who will focus on cultural performances as a way of strengthening cohesion and creating purpose for the large group who are not involved in the day-to-day functional stuff.’

‘Culture?’ Barb scoffed.

Maggie shook her head. ‘What is the point of a sale if we’re all allocated rations?’

‘Well...while everyone is allocated their fair share, some have had access to extra items and this is the way of making that fair also.’

One of the managers responded, ‘You want to make inequality fair?’

‘Certain people will be allowed more freedom to make choices, purchase luxury items and have access to a greater selection.’

Andy stared at Brian with an unbroken gaze, taking in more detail than any of the others, staring almost through the man as he spoke of this seemingly meaningless sale.

‘Who are these certain people?’

‘Those people who deserve or who will be rewarded for their time and effort in these emergency circumstances.’

‘Not richer people?’

‘If they have made a genuine contribution, not because they are richer or poorer. You all will be rewarded with greater freedom at the sale with thanks from McJimray’s.’

Brian’s words interested Andy little. Andy’s eyes scanned the other managers picking up the way they held their arms as if holding themselves back, clutching elbows, crossing them or pushing them into their groins. If it wasn’t the posture then it was the movements that held his attention. The chewing of fingernails or just the biting down on the thumbnail, scratching the arm or rubbing unconsciously.

He looked back at Brian who sat coolly in the chair without even shifting its wheels at any time. He wouldn’t flinch with any of the rude comments and didn’t scratch, rub or chew, didn’t even hold any part of his body under pressure. For him there was no pressure. With all the weight of decision-making, and presenting this managerial façade while the staff played out their roles as if nothing had changed, and he didn’t display a single trait which would show worry or frustration.

He would hold every meeting the same, in the sterile office with the computer on the desk which was never turned on, asking everybody if they were excited, keen or ready, or any combination of these words which no one wanted to hear, never dampening his tone from the jubilant, excessively upbeat routine.

His news would filter through to the managers from other meetings with cultural teams, with events management and other organisers, content which would matter very little to these supposed genuine contributors who carried on their part in the spirit of commerce. The sales started and repeated in eerie likeness to normal sales which staggered the shopping of the general populace, allowing for most to be spoiled with restricted items and others to be rewarded with real benefits as he had mentioned, all with a certain amount of success.

No one complained, feeling the force of the sale and all of its nostalgia and significance. In fact no one could raise an issue that lay outside their department and its general workings. Other cameras had been dismantled and the suspicion was ignored, channelled into promises of maintenance and more surveillance. Items were shoplifted, but more worrying large amounts of stock was moved without anyone’s notice, and when Andy mentioned a sizeable crate disappearing from the store room he was looked at as if he was making the story up entirely.

‘And so, what are they going to do about it?’ Jade walked along with Andy now he had returned, keeping up with him and sweeping around to block his way before he reached Martin’s four-wheeled drive.

‘Who is they? Brian? The managers? This is the storeroom - it’s our territory

and our problem.'

His pause left time for Jade's anger to surface. They were joined by Layne who timidly stood to the side and read their body language.

'If this is about those of us who volunteered to live in this storeroom not somehow defending our territory in our sleep then maybe you should try it sometime.'

'I'm not saying anything about that.' Andy fell silent while his leg jiggled and he looked around for distraction. 'It is weird though...'

'That's it! You do blame us. Or worse,' Jade said stepping up into Andy's face. 'You think we moved it. Put it somewhere because it's such important cargo that we'd hide it from everyone else in our secret massive crate hiding place!'

Brian's voice interrupted from the speakers, 'McJimray's would like to remind everyone to visit the fantasy suites whenever they wish. Studies from leading fantasists show that a good dose of fantasy does wonders for the mind - make it part of your daily routine. Also, the weekly sales continue - tonight we have a very special treat, a visit from beyond the grave, John Benjamin himself playing in the centre.'

'I don't blame you.' Andy searched for a diversion.

'Maybe you should try an overnighter. Y'know, lead by example. Oh, sorry, that's right - your second life is more important than your first.'

Layne grabbed their attention without trying very hard. He stood still lifting a crow bar into view and Andy appeared very willing to take it even if he hadn't a clue why he was being offered it.

It was convenient to avoid Jade's eye contact, and avoid continuing the pointless discussion - some things were not under his control, she must have known that. He moved the crow bar around his hand, feeling the weight, and Layne gestured at the other crate.

'Seems like the thing to do,' Layne said. His cracked and emotionless face seemed calm and almost wise in contrast to the bickering parties. 'Get some frustration out, Bud...on the crate, that is - no domestics in here.'

'Thanks Layne.'

'No worries, eh. I have to check myself sometimes too, y'know, just when I'm getting a bit fed up. Some people are a bit more sensitive is all. Not that I'm saying that's what's happenin' with you two, but I've got a few more years on yous so I just thought I'd say.'

Jade bit her tongue and echoed Andy, 'Thanks Layne.' She stepped around to meet Andy on the other side of the vehicle. 'What are we doing now?'

Andy went ahead and pushed the bar into every gap he could with no success.

‘If we find out what is inside these crates then we’ll find out what was so important about stealing one.’

‘He was your boss wasn’t he? Didn’t you know what he dealt in?’

‘Honey is what he dealt in. You think someone, or at least four to six people judging by the weight of this thing, wanted to take that much honey?’

‘I’m sorry about bringing up your second life.’

‘My second life? If I backed out of that arrangement they’d evict her and the baby. Probably take them to the Care Wing so the baby didn’t disturb everyone in the halls. It’s just this way I can take a few necessities straight to them.’

Jade breathed in comically. ‘You’ve been stealing.’

‘Quiet. The puritan might hear you,’ he said, taking a look at Layne waiting patiently and looking as if he was making sure the coast was clear.

‘Hey, that puritan would give you the shirt off his back.’

‘Or a crow bar?’ Andy gave up, breaking a sweat and shaking his head.

‘I didn’t say he was perfect, but then neither are you.’ Jade shook a set of keys she had found on the driver’s seat. She shook them closing the gap between the two of them until she dangled them over his head.

He grabbed a hold of the keys and her, and they kissed while Layne looked the other way pretending he hadn’t seen anything. It was clear their minds weren’t focused on the task at hand as they held each other’s hand and lifted the crate’s lid - the smiles they reserved for each other took their time in seizing into anxious tension. They closed the lid with their free hands, their other hand clasped even tighter as if to transmit an SOS.

‘That’s not honey.’

‘Where did you say your secret massive crate hiding place was?’

‘Well, this guy gets special treatment,’ Jazz said pointing at Olly and leading the way through the ceiling space. ‘His family gets their own house.’

‘It isn’t a house. It’s the size of a playhouse - it’s ridiculous.’

‘But tell him the real story.’

Liam was only half listening. They had covered at least a sports field worth of distance and there was no end to the beams, struts and cable jungle. In the back of his mind was the fear of stepping on the ceiling panels and ending up fifteen feet down on hard flooring, or worse impaled on a shelving unit.

‘You want to think it’s all something, but really it’s pretty weird. We had to help with Edwin...’

‘No, from the beginning.’

‘I shagged a teacher.’

Liam stopped and shouted, ‘Wooo, what?’

‘Not my teacher. I was seeing this teacher. We had this set-up where we could

meet at one of those horrible kids playgrounds, sneak off into the toilets, you know, the big family-sized ones.'

'Yuck, but anyway.'

'No they were clean - they were only used by mums changing their babies n' shit. Anyway, that ends and I haven't seen her...'

'I feel like it might have been around nine months,' Jazz added.

'Wasn't cool. I was like ready to just block her out. But then, she's had this baby. We're all in line at the transporter gate, y'know, to be sent here and there she is with her baby.'

'Whose baby?'

'Our frickin' baby.'

'So when all the whole emergency - we gotta go - scenario happens, and the big voice is calling for families who need more space...'

'Amy and I, my sister Amy helping Miriam and me pushing Grandpa Edwin around, score our own pad.'

'And so Vanessa, his baby mama, becomes mama to daddy, and I get to sleep in a hall with a hundred other people wondering to myself how the sleeping arrangements in that little house work out.'

'They don't work out. There was a little more room when they moved Edwin, but...'

'So you top and tail? Her on top and...'

'It's horrible.'

'Horrible being so close to...wait - is she breast-feeding? Has she been breast-feeding this whole time a metre away from your head?'

'It's not...'

'And you've one eye looking this way, while the other is drifting...'

Liam shushed them and lowered himself so that he was suspended over a ceiling panel. Jazz like a gymnastic monkey swung around and lifted the panel while Liam silently protested. It was just enough to slip the edge up and leave a gap. Below them, visible through the ventilation windows, a meeting in the butchery involving the gang members had reached an odd point of business.

One of the patched men yelled, 'Money bags!'

Luke, or Mu, or Money Bags as he was now called, pushed through the plastic doors with his little backpack and handed it over to the first man he saw.

'What are you doing?'

'You can have it. Have all of it.'

'We don't want your money.'

Another interrupted, 'Where did you get the money first?'

'It's mine.'

‘You walk around shopping centres with that much cash?’

Luke thought about it. ‘It was from a deal.’

‘A deal? When I caught you trying to stash it you said it was payback.’

‘Yeah, but it’s yours now, eh.’

‘What would we do with your cash?’

‘I don’t know, but I want in.’

‘To what?’

‘Your gang.’

Liam looked at the others mirroring the looks of concern. ‘Gang? This is a gang? I don’t think we should be here.’

Below the ring of men turned from dark-skinned large men in leather jackets and black boots, to pale weedy men in white overalls and gumboots, stroking beards or repositioning uncomfortable aprons. Some laughed while the speaker, Crackz, explained what type of group they really were. Crackz wore a black and white camouflage jacket and a black T-shirt with a neck low enough to show his chest tattoos. A ball-like beard, grey and fuzzy, mingled with darker but no less fuzzy head hair forming a giant mane around the fully tattooed cheeks and forehead. The amateur spider webs stretched from ear to ear including the ears, the mask of a man who had seen some years behind bars. Even the eyes were darker than usual, the eyelids tattooed also, and the eyebrows hanging angrily and moving in time with his deep black lips.

‘A what?’ Luke smiled and looked around as if it was a joke.

‘A committee bro. This is nothing about territory here. This is about common interests. North and south represented in this room, and no disagreement over what’s important.’

‘And what is important?’

A long pause was broken by Brussel who heaved a pig’s head from the sink and dumped it on the cutting table inside the ring of men.

‘Meat, bro.’ Crackz said. ‘But we didn’t bring you in here with the committee to discuss the food chain or man’s basic need for meat. We’ll worry about the control of this commodity while you take your first assignment.’

‘Yep, yep, I’m in.’

‘First you go prospecting.’

‘You want me to go prospecting...but you’re not a gang.’

A patched man sang out poetically, ‘Gangs are underground brother, we’re in space. We’re above it all.’

‘Bring in a prospect, and not just anyone, someone who can be trusted - use your cash if you want - and then we’ll find you a sweet permanent position.’

Luke was shown out and Crackz resisted slamming the table with the

underside of his fist. He instead opened the fist and placed his hand on the steel surface across from the pig's head.

'Unless you fullas want to be eating this shit you better back us up. I told that useless bastard that our department isn't part of these bullshit sales. You understand why? People getting rewarded with our products, people feeling like they have a right to it - where is the respect? Kitchener doesn't get to hand it out to whoever he thinks deserves it. This is our game and it has always been the same.'

'Well said, bro,' the patched poet said.

Brussel nodded along and Crackz nodded with him. He then reached across the table and pulled the pig's head towards him.

'Now, unlike you fullas some us don't mind this.'

Liam covered his mouth as Olly and Jazz asked each other what he was doing. Crackz had taken a knife and gouged both eyes out. He rudely threw one eye across the table to Brussel and lifting the other up so he could drop it into his own mouth.

The ring of silent men looked at Brussel and he turned paler and then without breathing he picked the eye up and placed it unwillingly into his mouth. His chews told the story of keen hunter and fisher who had once or twice eaten a fish eye in front of the kids or the odd female just to see them squirm, only now he squirmed while putting on a brave face. He swallowed and was pulled into a handshake with Crackz unsure if he could keep the mouthful down, taking a breath finally to attempt a hearty laugh.

When Crackz and his men had left, Brussel relaxed his hard man posture and rested on the table while the others argued.

'Shouldn't you be part of these secret meetings with Brian, Matt?' Karl asked.

'I don't know if you'd call it a meeting anyway. I don't know what they'd be threatening him with - I'd rather not know.'

'What are they going to threaten us with when they find Peter?'

'You reckon they'd use blackmail?'

'I reckon we should do something before it gets put before the committee.'

Olly and Jazz had grown bored of trying to hear the conversation. Liam followed them back wondering to himself, 'Whatever happened to Peter?'

'Who's that?'

'Well, if you were to replace Brian with Peter, then that was the way it was back in Oamaru. Only difference was Peter had nothing else to do but study numbers. He was mad on efficiency and wanted us all to be robots. He'd let Maggie do all the telling people off and didn't care if we had issues with Dianne

or Barb. Oh, and he'd be in his office drinking coffee and watching through the cameras all the time.'

'Maybe that's what Brian does too.'

'Maybe. It started messing with my head though - all the one person saying this and another saying that, and no one agreeing. I was going to make a bomb at one stage.'

'What?'

'Just joking, but not really joking.'

'And now? You still feel like making a bomb?'

Liam thought about it and shook it off, saying, 'No, that would be crazy.'

'How far did they go?' Tim asked.

'Shall we lock them up there?' Campbell raised the panel and triggered the drill.

'Yeah, we should - they're like little kids running off and hiding.'

'What happened to you, Tim? You're a lot more stressed these days.'

'Wouldn't you be? I've got them all at me telling me you're Maggie's spy, telling me to check on you all the time and the others.'

'Makes you wish you were back home, huh?'

'You wouldn't have known about it, but it was pretty much the same back there. Same war going on between those women and everybody else, acting like they owned the place, giving the young people shit all the time.'

'But you do wish you were home.'

'Of course. I miss home, my family. I was going to Uni. I miss that more than anything. That was the big thing this year - I was going to be fighting off the chicks instead of fighting with the women here.'

'They thought you were lazy I guess.'

'Going to Uni would have proved them wrong.'

'Were they wrong?'

Tim shrugged his shoulders and then rethought nodding to himself. 'Yes, they were wrong. I could tell you stories, being yelled at in the storeroom, being sworn at, then they give me a warning for swearing. Being told I was lazy and talk too much when everyone talked too much, and everyone slacked off, but it was only me getting in trouble. In fact it was because they talked too much that they made it such a big deal. I was just trying to have fun a lot of the time, just being myself.'

He took another look around the ceiling space and lifted the other end of the panel up, signalling to Campbell to drill the panel on. Campbell smiled and laughed along with Tim then thought deeply.

'You know Maggie's my grandmother, eh? I obviously know where you're

coming from, but I also know her outside of work...and she is even worse outside of work.'

Tim raised his eyebrows and moved on to the last panel. 'Yeah?'

'And for the record, it's just a job. You haven't really had the full effect until it's all about real life. You haven't had to experience anything at work - you got to go home. What do you think - they'd be kind and understanding at home? You were pissed off with clocking out for toilet breaks. I got treated like I was a stranger, like a criminal - I had to escape for real to get away and look how that ended up.'

When the last panel was up they both sat down cross-legged and waited for the arrival of the others. Tim shook his head finally and admitted, 'You're right. I took it a bit far, but you do spend more time with your workmates than you're family. That's why we kicked Dianne out of here. This is our workplace and we'd rather run it with people we want to be with.'

'Almost like a family?'

'Almost. But you can still get fired. If you are Maggie's spy we'll have to think up something worse for you.'

They listened to the noise of someone trying to lift the panels. Further down a panel slipped away easily and Liam stuck his head out, saying hello in his unusual way. Campbell and Tim looked at each other and shook their heads in disbelief.

'They sent the wrong guys for this job.'

Campbell hit Tim on the shoulder before they walked over to help the others down and said, 'Seriously though. You can get too wrapped up in a war over nothing with those agro women.'

'Better the war than the denial.'

'They think you guys are plotting something in here. They don't get the whole blocking people out.'

'They know everything about blocking people out.'

Maggie demanded the crate gates be open. She urged a woman forward so she could speak for herself. Erana Richardson along with Amy asked the odd row of faces at the other end of the gate if they had seen a couple of cast members.

'We have to start rehearsals again and there is no point getting started without the boys.'

Erana seemed to have lost weight. Her normally severe appearance had been blunted, not untidy, but with a lack of care, an informality which was jarring. Her assertiveness was blocked by something keeping her attention away from the task at hand.

Amy finished, 'So, has anyone seen Olly and Jazz.'

'Oh, us...' Jazz said, awkwardly walking into view, followed by Olly. 'We were just helping out.'

'On that note,' Maggie interrupted. 'You can send Campbell out as well.'

'What makes you think Campbell's here?' Andy asked.

'That's not your business.'

Campbell could be seen in the distance making his way closer as Andy blocked the gap.

'Campbell's been helping out here. He's pretty handy with a drill.'

Maggie didn't know where to start. What did they need with drills? Why weren't they focusing on just doing their jobs? 'You've got to be kidding. A drill?'

'What's the problem, Mags?' Campbell asked sincerely.

She switched into nice Maggie, sweet and soft-spoken. 'We need you back here. Dianne and Barb are too short for the top shelves and we need at least one heavy-lifter.'

Campbell stood off to the Andy's side and Tim stood by the other, commenting in a soft voice, 'Are you alright, Maggie? You seem to be in a bad way.'

Andy looked at Tim out of the corner of his eye, lost for a moment in Tim's mimicry.

He followed, 'Yes, Maggie. You look crook as a dog. Grey, even, as a stunned mullet.'

'Yeah perhaps you've had a turn. It's scary how ill you look. It's probably best Campbell stays away so he keeps in good health.'

'What are you both on about?'

'It's just your voice all of a sudden lost all of its strength.'

'You almost sounded weak.'

Erana backed away with the boys and Amy, offering her own opinion, 'You'll want to look after yourself. Whatever happens, dear, you don't want to find yourself in the Care Wing.'

Tim almost burst out laughing. Whoever this woman was, she had taken their cue and shaken Maggie with her solemn words.

'Seriously,' Erana finished, 'No one comes back out. First sign of sickness though, that's where you'll find yourself. Take care.'

'I'm perfectly fine, thank you.' Maggie said, turning to Campbell and the others and cranked up her work voice. 'That's enough. Campbell, are you coming out or am I going to have to come in after you?'

'You won't get very far,' Campbell said.

‘Watch me.’

Maggie launched herself forward and faced with the angry woman Andy couldn’t help but retreat, pushing Tim and Campbell back with him. What Maggie saw then brought her to a stop. No words were spoken - just the look of fear in her eyes which spoke to everyone watching. Layne had stepped forward brandishing a battle axe and shield. He passed the shield over to Campbell and lifting the axe up to head height, saying, ‘He’s one of the team now. You don’t want to end up on your ass like Barb, do you?’

She stepped back, confusedly and clumsily, bouncing off the crate sides.

‘Nothing like a real weapon to instil a little real fear,’ Layne said as the crowd formed around him.

Andy leapt forward wrenching the shield off Campbell on his way. He pushed Layne away from the rest, turning him around in the process and ushered him behind the shelving unit, asking without expecting an answer, ‘What are you doing?’

It wasn’t long before the crowd followed them and questions were thrown out at all angles.

Andy threw back the tarp on the crate and showed everyone what they had discovered. Inside the crate was an assortment of weapons packed loosely with straw. The axe they had seen, but Andy listed as many as he knew from the display he had seen above Martin’s mantelpiece. ‘A long sword, a scimitar, a mace, two or three shields, helmets...’

‘What else is in there?’

‘What else!?’ Tim yelled at Liam. ‘How about why!?’

Andy answered quickly and finally, ‘It’s just a collection of weapons that Martin was bringing in to sell - there must have been a buyer on-board and they belong to that person. We aren’t touching this collection.’

He placed the axe down next to the shield and closed the crate looking around at the most disappointed faces he could imagine.

‘Unless we need to,’ Carl added.

Several conversations carried on in manic excitement. Jade helped Andy pull the tarp back over the crate and stared at him until she had a response. He shook his head and she joined him sitting on the crate. They watched the crew play-fighting and slowly finding the motivation to do some work with this new empowerment. Each one seemed to beam with confidence knowing that should they need it there was an awe-inspiring weapon for each defender.

‘Zombie’s don’t stand a chance,’ Jade said thoughtfully picking her words, ‘Unless they have the other crate.’

Andy nodded with his whole upper body, not knowing where to look. The

others, they should never know what was on his mind, but Jade? It was too late - he had to trust Jade.

‘And what might be in the other crate?’

He shuffled off the crate and slipped the lock back on, mumbling, ‘Martin must have been hard-up. I don’t know why he would... Maybe he was selling the station. A lot of history in that house. Not a lot he necessary cared about. These weapons are a surprise. They would probably fit in the other crate - I could see that, yeah, that would be right.’

‘What did the house contain? What was he selling?’

‘The house had an armoury.’

‘A what?’

‘Or it could be full of antiques. The other crate could just have valuable antiques in it.’

‘Or? Or?’

‘Antiques or guns. One or the other, I’d say.’

‘Or both, right? Antique guns that look old and unusable - is that what you’re saying?’

‘No. Old maybe, but useable. Perfectly useable guns. Lots of guns. Some new ones too.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yeah.’

Liam took up his position by the door ready to filter any requests through to the storeroom. Karl peered through the crack between the door frame and the crate, trying to get someone’s attention. For the gate keepers it was less often now that anyone from butchery visited. Liam put on a friendly face and saw Karl’s serious mannerisms only through a crack.

‘Let us in - need to make a stock run.’

‘No, sorry. Pretty sure you’ve moved all your stock anyway.’

Karl pushed his head against the crate. ‘No, there is still plenty. Liam...Liam.’

‘Under orders sorry. No one from outside the team comes in.’

‘You’re all crazy.’

‘How’s Peter? Haven’t seen him around in ages.’

‘Peter who?’

‘Peter Peter - our manager technically if we were back home.’

Karl went silent and disappeared leaving Liam to climb up onto the crates to see where he went. It was a strange reaction to what he thought was a genuine conversation topic. He could only see and not hear how his words had triggered aggressive whispering and postures as Karl met up with other butchery workers

outside the butchery entrance.

Eventually their team moved back into their department. Liam could bring back images of the meeting around the cutting table, the sight of pig's flesh and the gang members. Even though he thought of himself as the calmest of all the team, he felt some kind of unease that he couldn't put into action. If he could manage it, he promised himself to make another trip through the ceiling space as if spying would settle his mind.

‘IT IS NOT
EXCLUSIVELY
ANYWHERE WHERE
ANYTHING IS’

While John Benjamin took the stage in the centre, a line of people filtered through the supermarket entrance each taking a sticker freshly printed from the sign-in machine which gave them a list of items they could choose and quantities they could change to fit their particular diet.

No matter how lenient the system the majority groaned as if they had reached the equivalent of wartime rationing. Most complaints came from those with money who could not use it, who rushed around the aisles as if their favourite items were disappearing in the seconds leading up to obtaining them. Others would take the opportunity to mingle and pass on information however limited it all seemed.

Layne had changed into the new clothes he was allocated, looking proud and sharing how unusual it was for him to have clothes this good to anyone who would listen. He remarked to Andy and Jade who only now emerged from the storeroom, ‘I feel like a new man. I never knew it felt this good. You two need to get changed? You want me to hold the fort?’

Andy and Jade shared cheeky looks, until Andy answered, ‘No, the boys have it sorted. We’ll probably just hit the sale I suppose.’

Layne looked as if he didn’t trust them. ‘You sound like you’re coverin’ for something.’

Jade cleared her throat and slapped Andy as if she just remembered, ‘And we were going to make that mission around to look for...’

Before Andy could think of an alternate missing word, Layne brought up the missing crate. They all agreed it could not be far.

‘But you’ll stick out like sore thumbs in the uniform. Cruise past the clothes stores - everyone’s getting a new lick of paint this week. Nothing like changing the outsides to make you seem fresh and new.’

Andy agreed, nodding and musing on an abstract tangent. They stuck their heads inside every department, even attempting a scan of Maggie’s office, before heading out into the mall. It was in between racks of clothes in an almost empty store, that Jade and Andy suddenly felt self-conscious, and not because they had been snooping around.

‘This is weird y’know,’ Jade said looking through a rack of evening wear. ‘Just too weird.’

‘Yeah? What’s so weird about shopping for free clothes in a mall you can’t leave?’

‘Weird that we’re all so blasé about it.’

‘Maybe it’s just us. Maybe we’re the blasé ones. I mean at least we get to have a little fun right.’

She looked up and then over at Andy who had changed into a formal shirt and tie.

‘You’re right - a little fun is good.’ Jade sounded emotionless. Not only did Andy not receive her coded thoughts, but he did not pick up on her change in tone signalling the presence of a certain pseudo-partner.

Anita pushed the pram into a convenient position between racks and greeted Andy eerily like a wife would her husband. Jade only for a second wondered if this was clever comedy or entirely sincere, all just before checking for cameras and concluding it may be a necessity for them.

‘I’m Jade.’

Anita introduced herself while Andy struggled to keep up with it all. Diagonally opposing the couple in a clear triangle, pausing the shopping date she had intruded on, she pushed a near perfectly crafted fringe out of her eye and talked about the sale like it was everything she dreamed of, as if to confirm for Jade that she had some kind of sense of humour.

Jade could only see how gorgeous she looked, however much a contrast it seemed for a tiny frame to have produced a child, and for pale skin to be so healthy, even despite rings under her eyes and lines which seemed to enhance her looks. This sort of weathered beauty seemed to translate into any context she could imagine, forming an obsession that plagued her with images of the two of them at the beach, feeding ducks, or shopping just as they were doing now. She shrank back unable to contain the thoughts, watching her face twist into cheeky

smiles and knowing glances that were wise beyond all possible likeliness.

‘The powers-that-be will think you’re having an affair,’ Anita said quietly to Andy with a squeaky laugh. ‘How is life underground? I really should visit you where you work, but then people might get the wrong idea, or the right idea, right?’

Jade watched her cute peaks from behind the fringe back and forth between the two. She saw herself for a second looking at another couple’s date, reminiscent of Graham and the weird artist, but even more like the honest relationship happening currently. An empowerment came to her as she continued to observe from what felt like afar, knowing it was Anita on the backfoot - Anita the heroic waif flicking through racks as she carried on talking with her simultaneously sunken and bulgy eyes.

A loud voice interrupted their occupied attentions. Andy recognised Andre calling for men or manly women to join the tug-of-war.

‘I must do my duty,’ he said, following Andre and excusing himself.

Anita moved the pram over to the entrance and Jade stood by her with a partial view of the centre. They shot glances like bullets at each other, relying on the event to distract them from themselves.

John Benjamin, who had backing from a few musicians who now were being waved at to stop the song, was the last to give in to the distraction of the rope pull. Butchers, students, teachers, even the gang members stood around telling each other what to do. The antics seemed to have absorbed every last member of John’s already stretched audience. With the professionalism that came as automatic as swallowing, John brought the song to an early finish and the drummer played around with expectant snare trills.

There was disbelief in the old man’s voice just as it was written on his face, not that anyone was watching as some of the shirts starting coming off. John took the microphone with him as he climbed off the stage. ‘Now I get it. The doctor has ordered a higher dose of testosterone for every male and some new fodder for the fantasy suite addicts to chew on.’

He looked around as the centre audience began to rebuild with word of mouth spreading to all corners.

‘Everybody, welcome to the impromptu tug of war, a crowd favourite at every live event, normally consisting solely of high school students who have something to prove, but currently manned by every able-bodied man willing to incur life-threatening injuries for the sake of showing their muscles.’

Muscles weren’t the topic of conversation in the clothes store. ‘Oh Martin, really?’ slipped out of Anita’s mouth at the sight of the overweight man hobbling at the back behind the gang members with a smile on his face. ‘He’s clearly

picked his winner. Don't pick up that rope Martin. Oh, he's not.'

Jade ignored her familial tone. She had been told something about their connection - this uncle and his ute parked in the storeroom filled Jade with questions she felt she had to recklessly ask. 'Anita, Martin and you are related - not so obviously but anyway - have you heard him talk of any theft of his property while on board?'

'No, and I would have heard about that.'

'So maybe he might have moved his own crate if he wanted to - do you know where he...is he sleeping in the hall with the rest of them?'

'You know, I don't know. All I know is we were lucky not end up with him in our habitation, as unfair as that sounds - he snores like a chainsaw. What's this about his crate? I didn't know he was supplying McJimray's. They're pretty selective with their products and he could never produce enough to...no, so what was this about crate?'

'Oh, no - we don't really know. It was moved from the storeroom.'

'Moved? You said theft before.'

'And now I think about it, it may have just been moved.'

'From what I heard you had things pretty well controlled back there. No way in or out? Who could move such a thing?'

Jade now felt like she was on the back foot. Did they talk a lot about storeroom business? 'Exactly.'

'Unless of course they dismantled the whole crate and carried each item out piece by piece...like ants,' Anita said spoiling her serious tone with a squeaky laugh.

'Yeah.' Jade considered feeling a little offended by her jovial take on the security of the storeroom.

'My thoughts are Martin would never sell that collection. He is humble and caring at heart. Loves horses and hunting, the simple things in life. No one would move him from the station and nothing would make him sell off any little piece of it. And he is certainly no pacifist, so don't think he just couldn't stand the sight of weapons.'

A roar came from the crowd as the rope tightened.

'Andy told you there might be guns in the crate?'

'No,' Anita stared at Jade. 'He said you had half the ornamental collection. My brothers loved that display, they were obsessed with that collection. That collection has been in the family longer, and on the wall longer than those guns have been there. But the same thing goes for the armoury. How big were the crates?'

'More muscle!' John shouted as Andy and Andre came to the centre of the

rope, the last unmanned position. With the microphone away from his cynical mouth he leaned in, 'Why aren't you two on the same team? God knows good things happen when you two get together.'

His laughter was short-lived as the rope tensed again, pulling inattentive participants from their positions. Andy and Andre merely stepped back and forward with the movement wondering if the other cared to comment.

'I've been meaning to catch up with you, bro, seriously,' Andy started. 'To enlist your skills.'

'Ah yeah, and what skills are those?'

'The same skills you're using now.'

Andre tensed around the rope and joined the pull. 'Why do you need my skills?'

'Funny, actually, given the current situation. There is a bit of push and pull over territory.' Andy gripped the rope also feeling unsure of the jerking movements. 'A bit of sensitivity in regards to certain animal products.'

'What are you talking about bro?'

'Some people who at present seem to be meat-eaters let's say want to control a little more of the dinner plate.'

'Nah, you're talking strange to me.'

'We just need to defend everyone's right to equal shares with the stock. I don't think that's happening and it's not going to get any better.'

Andre avoided eye contact and started to strain. 'Why should we have equal shares? Not everything is equal.'

John Benjamin conducted the performance, taking a commentator's tone mixed with an auctioneer's manic slurring.

'I disagree, bro. We're fairly equal at the moment.'

The rope and the teams started to move on an axis. The men behind Andre stared through Andy towards their invisible goal.

'I don't know,' Andre grunted. 'More muscle over here.' The gang members and butchers were aligned, and fierce faces tensed and squeezed seizing breaths through flared nostrils. 'I chose my team bro. And if they got the meat then I joined the right team.'

'What do you mean you chose your team?'

'They asked me to join.'

Jade tried to estimate the size of the crate with her arms. For some reason it jogged Anita's memory.

'Venison. He was probably bringing in meat to sell to the company.'

'It wasn't on ice.'

'Well, maybe it should have been but it was never frozen before the

evacuation. Then you'd have your reason for why it was moved.'

'We would have smelt a crate load of rotting meat long before it was moved.'

'Would you? The crate was moved right under your nose, so...'

Jade tried to contain her anger, not so much with Anita but with Andy and this unfiltered flow of information that she had absorbed. She stood amazed by her recollection and assuredness.

'And the weapons?'

'The collection? I don't even know if they are real - how can you tell these days?'

'They're real.'

'Maybe he was getting it valued...for insurance purposes. God knows we all need insurance.'

'Do we?'

'Yes. For example, I have a good thing going with Andy. I really, really need him and lately I find he spends more time somewhere else and often forgets some of the necessities of raising a child and being a woman - some of those things not particularly catered for in the prescribed shopping lists. It's easier for some, but when you've a little one it complicates things.'

'And the insurance?'

'I don't want to lose him just so he can sleep in a storeroom and pretend he has to be a hero when the supplies run down. So I promised him I'd sign his papers and get his citizenship reinstated.'

'And if he doesn't want to stay with you?'

'I can only do what's right and report him. Which means he'll be deported like any other overstayer.'

'Overstayer?'

'Oh!' Anita's attention snapped back to the tug of war. 'Oh my God!' She erupted into a cackle before Jade had realised what had happened.

Either side of the stage a pile of men had landed one on top of the other. The rope, now in two pieces, lay motionless to the side while they helped each other up. Brussel yelled in pain while the bulk of the gang members' weight slowly peeled off him. He was lifted up onto unsure legs and wailed in pain as he tried to walk the embarrassment off.

Andy and Andre remained on their asses staring at each other. For someone who had made his choice, Andre didn't seem all that proud of it. There was certainly no coming to his aid or slapping him on the back. The distance between the two of them meant they both had to right themselves and dust themselves off separately however much they mirrored each other's actions.

But Andy couldn't leave his friend without checking, 'They bring up that

accident outside the headquarters?’

‘What’s it to you?’ Andre shook his aggression off almost immediately struggling to hold back his discomfort. ‘Sorry, bro. Yeah, they mentioned it. In fact they think I owe them something and they think I owe something to the family of that girl too.’

‘That ain’t right.’

‘You keep on thinking that for all the good it’ll do.’

‘What family anyway? Who’s related to that girl?’

‘This guy Luke. They’ve got me working with him, but they haven’t told him.’

‘Told him what?’

‘That I backed over her.’

‘Yeah but, that’s not...’

‘I know bro - who’s telling the story over this side though?’

As if to answer Andre, the guys behind tapped him on the arm and nodded at him to come with them. He nodded back, raising his chin up and around to look back at Andy. That aggressive face was back, the performance had started.

Andy almost felt like he had to play along, somehow like he represented a rival gang and wanted to challenge them for possession of Andre. He saw himself walking up to the guys and tapping them on the shoulder - a stand-off ensues, a confrontation or contest. Him, a weedy white guy with a shabby beard and any one of the gang members, burly, rough and ready to intimidate with a look.

Imagination got the best of him as he watched his friend move away with the others. He didn’t notice Brian take control of the announcing, John Benjamin looking up at the man who had stolen the spotlight and left the old man talking to himself through a dead microphone; he didn’t hear Brian talk about next week’s performance with great exuberance despite hiccupping and stuttering multiple times, and most unbelievable it was Anita and Jade who connected back with reality, being audience to Erana Richardson’s out of character outburst.

Instead he could see only his own beating when he stood up to the bullies, a beating Andre wouldn’t save him from now owned by the gang and all in the name of a bloody butchery.

Erana’s breakdown was a muted attack that Andy couldn’t involve himself in. While Jade poked him in the side and asked if he was watching this, and the woman shrieked in the background about old people or something about her husband, he wondered why he let himself get caught up in this aggression. A wounded part of him really thought to be a Buddhist you could act with compassion and humility and actually continue to contribute.

The real world was a hopelessly enlarged and unfocused image of a school yard with all the factions at play with little to gain and even littler to lose. If they just threw the idea of spirituality in at any point, a society like this would surely lift its game.

Then we wouldn't be flexing our muscles, falling over each other to land on the person behind, bumping, banging and crushing, over and over - or screaming at the walls to vent our frustrations. Every time Andy opened his mouth to talk about it, the weight of reality, of real choices and real consequences, sank the whole idea of spirituality almost instantly.

And in another instant, another crushed spirit walks past, not just like a ghost but like a zombie. John Benjamin finds some distance between him and the drama back at the centre. The eyes, how they resist focus on anything - they are not just sunken, but his whole will is sunken to a depth, a feeling which follows him as he tries to escape.

I can feel his pain. I can just about think his thoughts - the twisted narrative of the past and its millions of implications for the future. The spotlight taken away and how the audience unearthed him and pulled him to pieces for entertainment until they ignored him, distracted by men pulling a rope. He hates, and the hate fills his view. He can't be around people and he can't drink it away.

Inside each human, a fragile emotional centre prone to ill fantasies - each chord of sadness and resentment, guilt and frustration entirely in their heads. No one plays along as they are fixated on their own tune.

Anita says something about baby stuff and Jade makes a gesture like they need to continue their search, and in between the two Andy is lost in his centre - he agrees to both and forgets every detail as he walks back to the supermarket following behind John Benjamin.

Ahead of the both of them the gang members and Andre are filing into the butchery. Andy tries to ignore the fact that he has seen them despite Andre making eye contact across the distance. He makes the order to pull back the crate towers that block the entrance to the storeroom and stands back to take a look at Andre now that his back is turned as he stares down the other end of the supermarket.

Pointing. Andre has lost that posture and Andy is sucked into the storeroom by his own will. Forget that guy. What could be so important that he risks looking distracted in front of the gang? Andy turns for one last look and Andre disappears, shaking his head slowly - a group catches his eye, John Benjamin talking with Martin Ryder, and another man.

Who cares? Where's Liam? Andy shuts down and auto pilot takes over. Men and their responsibilities, a game of unwritten rules, lessons learned by coldness

and indifference - you say and do what the last man said and did, and that way you have no responsibility and no unnecessary pressure.

‘Where were you?’ He finds himself asking Liam.

‘Just over there.’

He doesn’t care, he is just angry and wants Liam to know it. He sounds like his own father. He just wants to go home.

Home. For the lucky ones, home meant four walls and a roof. Where Vanessa chatted with Maggie it also meant visual division of boundaries. A picket fence separated them and potted plants provided the illusion of a natural canopy, an illusion Vanessa needed to make her feel that there was some sort of distance between her and the hot-headed woman.

Inside the habitation Olly had arrived back and interrupted Amy’s festival of gossip with Ash and Bernie. He reclined, giving his sister a pinch on the arm as she sat leaning on the wall in a mess of foam and sheets.

The conversation immediately turned back to Mrs Richardson’s outburst. Ash leaned back and rested her head on Olly’s leg looking sideways, asking, ‘Did you hear her? The old battle axe is back at it.’

Olly smiled back at her. ‘Giving Kitch an ear-bashing?’

‘Yeah,’ Bernie joined in, hugging her tanned legs with her head on her knees. ‘She must be very worried.’

‘You think?’

Amy asked, ‘About the performance or her husband?’

‘I feel like her husband was already sick or something.’

‘Something like diabetes.’

‘Is that not fixable?’

‘No, it’s like something else.’

Olly didn’t know and it didn’t seem to affect him whether Erana could see her husband or not. ‘And what about the performance?’

‘Ah, it’s so funny.’

‘I’m real into that.’

‘I don’t actually mind doing it here.’

‘Do you just love that Kitch thinks it’s so exciting?’

‘I feel like it could be difficult with Mrs Richardson like she is.’

‘Pav can handle it,’ Olly said. ‘I couldn’t stand to see Mrs Richardson having a spaz again.’

‘Oh, she cried didn’t she? She’ll so do that again. We only have a week.’

Ash look over to Olly again. ‘I agree. Pav can handle it. We can work hard. Just as long as you don’t drop me.’

Olly was lost for words. At two points in the performance Olly had to lift her

up with her balancing on his shoulder, a move which required a hand on her upper thigh.

Bernie hugged her legs tighter. 'And they'll be no holey tights this time.'

Ash kicked her best friend, but agreed, 'That was way back at the beginning. It's been hot pants since then.'

'I know, but there's no hot pants either.'

The girls laughed and Ash stole a glance from Olly who could only lift his hands up and twist them around then laugh under his breath. 'I'm up for it.'

Ash and Bernie cackled together while Amy groaned, changing the subject. 'Where have you been anyway?'

Vanessa walked in catching the question and the attention of the visitors turned to the baby. She let them take the baby carefully and sat down keen to hear Olly's answer.

He found a knot in the wood to fixate on, working it with his fingers while he tried to avoid eye contact, saying, 'It's not bad. Actually it is like being part of the rebellion.'

'The rebellion?'

'Yeah, you know. The good rebellion. Jazz and I, oh and Campbell this guy from the supermarket, we got into the ceiling space and ended up inside the storeroom. The staff there are protecting the food from thieves.'

'Oh.' Vanessa acted surprised.

'So it's not a rebellion,' Amy commented.

Vanessa explained, 'Old Maggie next door - I shouldn't call her that, how rude - she seemed to think that that was Brian Kitchener, the McJimray's guy, his doing. I mean that he had told them to barricade the door because he couldn't trust certain groups. That's just what she said.'

'Well, I don't know. We just go out on missions from there through the ceiling to check on whose meeting with who and then make sure no one else can get through the ceiling.'

'She didn't have anything good to say about Brian, saying he's lazy, inattentive, too laid back.'

'I couldn't say, eh - he's never around.'

Vanessa carried on while listening for something, 'And then while we were talking he started reading a story to everyone over the PA.'

Ash and Bernie laughed to each other and questioned what she'd said. Vanessa opened the miniature window and pointed out while they listened to the soft voice which reached every hall, room and corridor of the ship.

'What is he reading?'

'Some science fiction story, I think.'

Olly sniggered, 'It's a graphic novel. No I'm serious - that's a graphic novel. He's reading the speech bubbles and captions.'

'A comic book?'

'He's reading us a sci-fi graphic novel?'

The group didn't know what to think. Vanessa closed the window and they joked and laughed until the reading became just another background noise.

'You should have heard what old Maggie said. She swears like a fishwife. Anyway, when he started up you'd have thought he'd done it just to annoy her, like it was torture.'

'I think it's nice,' Bernie said with the baby in her arms.

'Mmm,' Vanessa agreed, thinking about something else.

'Nice if you're eight.'

'There are some eight year olds around, don't forget that.'

Olly put his hands up, 'Alright, alright.'

Vanessa leaned over to Olly. 'So, now I know that you're spy for the good guys or whatever the case, do you think you could find the Care Wing? For Edwin, y'know - it'd be good to know he's looked after, but I can't bear the thought of taking...'

They looked over at the baby. Olly had been trying to shake his head, thinking that it was unlikely, but there was always the chance that he might come across the wing.

'Anymore.' She finished. 'There's a lot of bugs going around and it's not the place to take children.'

Almost reluctantly, Olly promised he would do it. Something about being so close to Vanessa stirred him. He had to snap out of it when Ash started stretching just outside the habitation. She eyeballed him while hitching a leg on the fence and bending herself over it.

'Are we going to practice now or what?'

Olly excused himself awkwardly and walked outside, then said, 'Does that go all the way up?'

Ash laughed at the lame comment. 'All the way over my head? I've never tried.'

'Maybe you should.'

'I might need some help.'

He sighed and shook his head. 'I might be able to help you.'

Andy arrived at his habitation, having ignored the mad rambling over the PA during his walk, and emptied the goods onto the floor. A graceful arm lifted, followed by a torso, and a dozy head with almost perfectly ruffled hair, with the intention of giving him a hug. He gripped the arm and they made a half-attempt

at it that resulted in more of a hand-shake.

‘I pity the people in the communal halls. At least we can close the door on Brian.’

She sifted through the items leaning over her child while Andy gave a wave hello. ‘Where are the breast pads?’

‘The what?’

‘The breast pads - the nursing pads?’ She asked holding back her most impatient tone.

He gritted his teeth and looked away.

Anita threw her hand up and softened. ‘Doesn’t matter. Tomorrow? Thanks again.’

‘That’s OK.’

‘No, it’s not,’ she replied, quoting her own rudeness, “‘Where’s the breast pads?’” Listen to me. I sound like I’m talking to a shop assistant. I can’t even get my own products and I have to ask you to sneak them away, and you do it. So it’s not just OK, it’s awesome - you’re awesome.’

She rolled around trying to take the attention back off the baby. ‘Are you tired?’

‘What from the tug of war?’

‘No, in general. I am - I’ve just been lazing here, waiting. God, it gets boring.’

‘No I’m alright.’

‘You’re more than alright.’ She rolled between the baby and Andy, and with her back to him lay back down again resting on her arm and raising the other one. ‘Snug in?’

Andy’s nostrils flared as he was pulled into spooning Anita. ‘Actually, I’ve got something else I needed to do.’

‘I love your new clothes by the way. Isn’t it cruel - we have to be so sparing on food and luxuries, but we can have new clothes that make us look like we’ve loads of money and freedom.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re so warm. I need that.’ She paused only a second between her rapid statements. ‘Don’t go. Why would you go? Aren’t we lucky to have this? Why go now?’

‘I just have something I need to do.’

‘You seem distant, cold. You’re warm, but you’re cold at the same time.’ She pushed back into him.

It did feel comfortable - the new clothes, low stress, low responsibility fake family situation - and she did feel comforting. He could just drift off if that is all

she wanted, just of him to be there. 'I have a fantasy suite booked.'

'You've a fantasy suite right here.'

'That's true,' he said as his thoughts and pace slowed. He couldn't move even if he still wanted to. 'So still and calm. It's perfect.'

Anita smiled and tried to close her eyes for the few seconds of peace in this perfect position. It was her own feelings that resisted that peace. She fidgeted with her fringe until Andy realised there was never going to be just a still, relaxing lie down.

She held her breath and let the words go. 'It's not a fantasy suite booking.'

The voiceover outside lifted in tone as Brian described a climactic event almost raising to the point of his usual irrational enthusiasm. There were calls from further down the line of habitations for the man to shut up. Andy lost concentration, losing whatever fight she wanted to pick before it even started.

'That's a lie.'

'I want to stay,' Andy said plainly - at least his body meant it.

'You want to stay here. That's great. Then be here.'

'I am here.'

'You are not here.'

He reserved his sour face for the wall and noticed the backpack leaning up against it as if it was the first time he'd seen it in a month. 'Where am I then?'

'You're with her.'

'I am?'

The question remained unanswered. Plain truth was not on the cards. Both wanted to tease every sentence apart so that no feeling was adequately exposed.

Andy lifted himself up and kicked the backpack. He did it again and remembered only fragments of the evacuation. 'What is that?'

She waited a moment before sitting up, willing to blame the loss of such a divine fake moment squarely on him. 'You should go do your thing.'

Now she pretended that she wanted to avoid confrontation. Andy lost his ability to concentrate on her emotions entirely. 'Where is the backpack with the money in it?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I mean, I don't care...all that much about it, but...that's Te I Ching.'

She raised her voice over the story-telling outside, 'What are you talking about?'

'Do you remember before the evacuation, before they made any announcement - dirty, homeless-looking guy, telling us about an earthquake?'

'Kind of. Yes.'

'He turned into a robot.'

‘He did.’

‘Yes,’ Andy nodded harder as he spoke. ‘He’s in that backpack.’

‘He is? I don’t know - I might have missed that. I don’t know where your other backpack is.’

‘No, I don’t care about the other backpack.’

‘Do you care about me?’

Andy froze wondering how she could be pulling the conversation back at a time like this. He could barely start a sentence.

‘Because I care about you.’

‘That’s nice, but I have to go.’

She put up a hand to urge him to stay as he prepared to stand up.

‘If you go, I don’t know if I...should I care for you?’

He grabbed the backpack and stepped over her.

‘I mean, I have enough to care about. Why care about your future? Is your future important to you?’

Andy crouched down and said goodbye to the baby. He looked up at Anita and reached out for a hand that did not make contact.

Nodding with an unfeeling reptilian motion, he said, ‘My future is not important to me. Now is important to me.’

‘Where’s Tim?’ Jade asked as Liam tried to close the crate walls.

‘He hasn’t come back from the sale.’

‘You’ve been here by yourself the whole time?’

‘Andy stepped in and stepped out with baby stuff. I had to pee in the produce sink.’

Jade shook her head, seething under her breath. ‘This is getting ridiculous. We need everyone to take this more seriously.’

Liam was quiet and the crate stalled.

Jade continued, ‘Do you remember what we found in the corner of the storeroom?’ She stared at his face and asked, ‘You didn’t do anything in that corner did you?’

Three men clustered by the entrance and made their way through slowly. Jade was caught off-guard and it was something she could not make up for once they were through.

‘Hello Liam,’ John Benjamin said waving and passing by as if there had been no attempt at all to stop people entering.

Liam could only raise a hand off the trolley jack handle to greet John, having used all his energy to try and push the crate to no avail.

The other two were equally oblivious looking around silently, until the larger of the two, Martin Ryder, strode out in front and discovered the crates from his

vehicle had been moved.

‘Hello,’ Martin said to Jade struggling to be polite as his low pitch crackled with panic. ‘Where have the crates gone - do you know? I brought them in. Were they stored somewhere. Where did they go?’

‘Um. To be honest we thought you might know.’

The others talked and the third member of the group gestured towards the ceiling, uninterested in Martin’s surprise.

‘Well, I don’t know - I wasn’t informed. That is some pretty sensitive cargo. Not the type of thing that goes missing easily. Someone must know what happened to it.’

Jade was conflicted and Liam couldn’t stop himself from sharing his fascination. ‘Actually it really did just disappear - the whole crate.’

‘The whole crates,’ Jade corrected Liam and then corrected herself, ‘Both crates.’

Martin did not have a face that could be lied to easily. Although he reserved his anger it was the disbelief and disappointment which sat so clearly for all to see, so much so that Jade was cracking.

‘I needed to check one thing.’

‘Is it related to my crates?’

‘Liam can you come with me, please.’

Jade walked past Martin, followed by Liam who skipped along in stark contrast to the man. They could not brush him off easily however, finding all three kept an eye on their movements.

‘Where are we going?’ Liam whispered.

‘You know that hole in the corner?’

‘I think so. Yes!’

‘There are holes just like it in almost every hall, all in recesses the same as that corner. The only difference is they are covered and this one is open.’

‘OK, well, you’ve lost me.’

They stood over the hole and looked down.

‘There’s a lid on the side that looks like it’s supposed to flip up.’

‘But there’s something inside stopping it.’

‘The other holes are like tubes or tunnels and this one has something in it.’

‘Bags not!’

Jade looked at Liam and then around at the other men. She sighed and crouched down, not willing to get into any debate on who has more arm strength, let alone who was more scared of putting their hand in a dark hole.

Martin moved around impatiently, concluding, ‘This has nothing to do with my crates. I’m going to have to see the manager.’

The machine came to life in Jade's grip. She screamed as if she had been touched by a large spider and pulled it up fully so it could take over control of itself. Two slender legs lifted the body into the air and the arms unfolded from around the object hidden behind its back.

A rifle Martin would recognise as his own fell to the ground as the projectors fired up and in a few seconds the insect-like robot lit up partial projections to hide itself until finally a representation of Brian Kitchener stood before them with a stolen rifle at his feet.

Brian stood vacantly waiting for updates, blinking with borderline reptilian motions, and making eye contact without any other sign of human recognition. By then the group of humans had backed off and the closed-mouth muttering had turned to expressions of disgust and confusion.

'The man's a robot?'

'The manager's a robot.'

'Brian's a robot.'

The machine powered down, losing the projection first and then its ability to balance. It folded back into its cylindrical form and sat down by the hole.

'Liam, do you think you could move this into the little office?'

As Liam lifted the machine, remarking on its lightness, Martin moved him aside to pick up the rifle and peered down the hole. He looked over to the third man and rested the rifle on his shoulder.

'What if I told you, Dave, that I suspect our manager, or whatever he is, of taking the collection I promised you?'

'Then I'd worry that things had already got to breaking point.' Dave's accent caught Jade's attention. 'The invitation is there guys. You've broken through to the other side and come back with leverage.'

Martin looked worried and ushered Dave away with him, leaving John to take another look at the machine now resting on the office desk. Liam was not even concentrating at the newfound toy. Instead he stared at the complicated circuit board left exposed behind the computer monitor and tried to cover up the pile of components and other trash before John or Jade saw.

He turned to see John leaning on the door frame. John pulled Jade in who was standing awkwardly back trying to get a look in. He gave her a hug and then moved her inside.

'Like one little, messed up family, in one little messed up predicament, aren't we?'

Jade looked up at him, rolling her eyes, while Liam stared at the wall more worried than any of them.

'Are you coming JB?' Dave's voice could be heard shouting further down the

store room. 'Come on buddy.'

He thought about it for a few while. 'Like to stay guys, but other places to be. I'd watch that Brian. I think the other two are pretty certain the captain is pulling some strings around here, some gang-related strings, so, yeah, all the best.'

Andy lay back in the chair, hooked into the fantasy suite experience, still clutching the backpack and concentrating hard on what weighed on his mind the most.

A steady stream of hatred had flowed from just about every other member of staff, from every fantasy suite session sanctioned by the McJimray's corporation since the evacuation. Scenarios where individual staff members were up against the boss archetype in unlikely circumstances, revolving around money-scrounging or technology-heavy reporting, or up against the authoritarian small-town woman who clustered with others for shelter, power and the right to be as abusive as was necessary to instil fear. The same routines played-out against Peter, Maggie and Barb, even weirder scenarios revolved around Dianne.

Always against, against, against, yet with Andy he appeared to transcend this common experience of the workplace, the ongoing melodrama. He floated above with an eye on good results, distracted only by an almost narcissistic interest in his own responsibility, and of course he presumed everyone was very alike in these thought systems.

Really, the rest of his team wanted nothing more than to clock in and clock out to section off part of their day for pay and go home without a single added responsibility, a work/life balance that came heavily protected by a false belief in rights and privilege. It was an almost upper class expectation of freedom they were only lucky to have. There might just as well be a model which took their whole day for work, seven days a week, and gave them only the night to recharge before the next.

Andy didn't live with many expectations. We was happy when the church wasn't asking so much of his time, wasn't expecting him to be there before school for special classes, or spend half the weekend at meetings or visiting other members' houses, all while paying for the privilege at a flat 10% of everything you earn in your own time. Workplaces to Andy were fair and just, giving contracts when necessary, spelling out rights and expectations, not allowing much room for the paranoid mind to get a grip.

He didn't channel his growing dissatisfaction into an us vs. them type of seemingly eternal opposition, not when his burning personal opposition was already well grounded. When he chose his freedom from the church he put the responsibility of every choice and every eventuality on his shoulders, and it was with his own mind that he felt opposed. The divine hold which he broke free

from was coming from inside and to focus himself and put things into perspective he really had to embody that divine presence and all of its analytic if not condemnatory powers.

He recognised the need to be vigilant and managed to maintain the team's group vigilance by exemplifying his own hyper-vigilance. Using content from such a mind requires an adjustment to levels of threat and pressure, the reality of which was somewhere between the most hardy individual and the most sensitive. Cryptically, while observing this mind in action, while Andy's content was stored and at the exact time that it was being used to form action plans, his paranoia grew exponentially.

A comparison could be drawn between the lowly individual crushed by the weight of the world and the divine presence that gives life and judgement - just as the lowly becomes conscious of the divine, a wave of negative assumptions hits the individual, dropped from such a height. The lack of control, the fear of death, the avoidance of pain, the resistance to being caged, the unspeakable existential dilemmas, the never-ceasing strain of a mind conscious of meaningless repetition, even if none of these factors have a direct bearing on the individual, certain minds can feel the force of these factors without experiencing anything close.

So, in this sense, Andy had already come to work preloaded with opposition, but in a place in his mind far up towards the divine realm, up in his over-inflated self-reflection, and he looked for a result that would keep him up there. Some would say he wanted to stay in a good mood.

The content that was processed referred to a discovery he had made, an object he carried around with him that seemed to empower his mission. McJimray's felt the risk had exceeded safe levels at that point. Levels of immediate consciousness were opened at this stage and found that Andy had left the fantasy suite - a lock-down of this area had immediately failed. He was found heading for the supermarket entrance still wearing the wireless headset and carrying the backpack. This behaviour was recognised as a significant level of awareness of the channelling of information through the suites, the sharing of which could put further operations at a disadvantage. Security of privileged information was at a direct threat.

Signing off on a more drastic course of action was needed. Under the current agreement this had to come from the directing body.

'Where are the games on this computer?' Luke mumbled to himself as he searched through folders with foreign names and files. 'Top deck environmental controls? That's not a game, is it?'

Brian's voice came from a speaker hidden somewhere around the console.

‘Mu, are you keen, excited, ready? Acknowledgement and permission is needed following a localised threat. Control of this threat can be achieved through lock-down procedures. May I have the directing body’s approval?’

Luke didn’t move a muscle. He looked around the console and then spun around in the chair without saying a word. He reserved his panic until he reached the door in the oversized control room, then opened it slightly - enough to shock Andre into attention.

‘Andre, bro. I need your help.’

‘What do you want Luke? I was told not to move from this door.’

‘Bro, the machine is talking to me.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I was searching for games on the computer. It’s boring in here.’

‘I need to stay by the door. It’s no joke - those guys will beat the crap out of me if I don’t do as they say.’

‘Aw, they’re not all that bad.’

‘Maybe not to you. You asked to be in the gang didn’t you? I heard you paid you’re way in. Me, I only came along because you said it was cool.’

‘They told me they’d give me something cool to do.’

‘At least they didn’t bully you into standing at the door forever.’

‘Bro, it’s not that cool in here either. There’s nothing to do and when there is something to do, it’s something I don’t know how to do.’

Andre shook his head and gave in. The only thing worse than Crackz using his past to blackmail him was being paired with the one person in the whole ship who might have a personal grievance with him. In a soft, understanding voice, he pushed through the door. ‘OK bro, you can’t tell Crackz I left my post though.’

‘Of course, bro.’

Andre tapped Luke on the back trying to establish a connection for himself. He had guessed they had not mentioned to him as of yet that he backed over his cousin’s head as she lay in a South Auckland gutter, whether by accident or on purpose and whether she was already dead or not. He took his first look at this room Luke had been told to protect and tried to focus on the lights, consoles, monitors, and the voice requesting urgent action.

‘What is this?’ Andre asked, spinning around to get the big picture. There was no one else around. This was a control room, if not the only control room, and the only two beings with this apparent control didn’t even know how to use it. ‘I know this room. I was brought here when I came aboard. There was a whole bunch of people here then. Are we supposed to be doing something here? I mean, are you supposed to say yes or something, to Brian...are you?’

‘I don’t know, bro, they told me just to sit and report stuff back to them.’

‘Not make any decisions?’

‘Nah.’

‘Because it looks like a place where people make a lot of decisions.’

‘Nah, bro - the computer makes all the decisions here.’

Brian interrupted, reaffirming the request, ‘The target can still be easily detained. Requesting full lock down of the mall areas.’

‘We might have to do something about this,’ Andre concluded, tapping Luke on the shoulder again.

‘Do what?’

‘Say something back.’

Luke lifted his chin and asked the console, ‘What do I say?’

Andre sighed and took a step forward, looking through the images from different cameras and cleared his throat. ‘Brian, what seems to be the problem... mate?’

In his awkwardly jubilant manner, Brian engaged Andre directly, ‘Andre, feeling strong? We could use a bit of muscle on the outside. We have a threat that needs some action. An individual is carrying a restricted item which needs to be confiscated.’

‘OK,’ Andre sat down and positioned himself beside another series of images. ‘Who is this individual and where is...’

‘Andy Bodine, currently in the East Wing heading towards the supermarket entrance.’

‘Andy? What’s he got that’s so restricted?’

‘I can’t be any more specific, sorry.’

‘Well, what happens if we say you can go ahead with lock-down?’

‘The safety screens will descend and there will be checkpoints between various areas.’

‘And Andy?’

‘Andy will be detained for questioning.’

‘Who’s going to question him, Brian?’

‘That would be up to the directing body.’

Luke stepped up to the console. ‘OK, I get it now, bro. I think I can take over here.’

Andre looked up at Luke with no expression, staring off into the distance as if he was watching an imaginary monitor.

‘Target is within twenty metres of the supermarket entrance.’

‘Bro?’

Andre lifted himself up and backed away, saying softly and slowly, ‘Take

over Cuz. It's your station.'

'OK, Brian bro, are you there?'

'I believe so, Luke.'

Luke fought against his own will, taking looks at Andre and the screens as if he had to look someone in the eye for reassurance. The words came strong at first and then he trailed off into a question, 'Permission granted?'

The announcement blared over the sound of muted sirens meant only for those passing through access ways that were slowly being close off. 'McJimray's Corporation would like to inform all inhabitants that a temporary lock-down has been initiated. Remain calm, further information will be available at each checkpoint.'

Andy threw the headset aside and ran only the few metres before stopping on the other side and watching the screen close over the supermarket entrance. The doubt he felt was directed at his paranoia. Up until then he had felt a little silly for acting as if he was being watched so closely and yet, now he had more reason to believe it was true and still needed to validate it by seeing the people coming for him.

He shook the fantasy off and walked at a steady pace to the storeroom in the dim light of the produce section.

In the control room Andre backed away from the console and almost made it back to his position before Brian's voice pulled his attention back.

'Target has not been detained. He is now entering the storeroom. A report is being printed for the directing body's appraisal.'

'What does that mean?' Luke asked, watching Andre close the door and leaving him to think for himself.

THE ZOMBIES

Although every movement made a rustling plastic sound, the best bed in the storeroom was the toilet paper pallet on the middle rack. It was possibly the best bed in the whole ship, particularly in the minds of its two inhabitants. The shrink-wrap sides bulged as the packets of rolls spread beneath them, and the whole pallet load jostled as they unfurled themselves to stretch arms and legs beyond its width.

‘Peaceful, isn’t it?’ Jade’s croaky voice said. ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Oh, me? I just had the memory of bunk beds,’ Andy said, looking up at the racking less than half a metre above them. ‘Made me think of visiting Gallipoli.’

‘Bunk beds? OK, so you slept in a dorm and that’s what you remember of Turkey?’

‘No, I slept in a room to myself. Everyone else I met seemed to be in large groups, Australians and Kiwis, living in and out of dorms. I was by myself - paid for a room and then made an overnight trip out with all of the tour buses from Istanbul. It was almost at the end of the tour before I met someone I actually related to and this guy was crazy.’

‘What made you think of that again?’

‘Well, we decided to go for a walk, you know down one hill and up the other, like the hills the soldiers would have tramped over. Forty minutes later we were almost exhausted and only two thirds up the bloody thing. We didn’t say it at the time and I had forgotten until now, but we made it a competition without even knowing it. In fact, everything we had said or done after meeting was about one-upping the other. That’s how we ended up where we did.’

‘And that’s how you got back?’

‘I guess so.’

‘So who won?’

‘I don’t know - I think I did.’

‘You’re supposed to say “no one did” because competition for the sake of it gets you nowhere.’ Jade fixed her eyes on Andy’s.

It took a few seconds for him react, drawn into a feeling he had not considered possible for so long. ‘Are we having a stare-off? Really?’

‘A staring competition. I’m making a point.’

‘I don’t know - it seemed fun at the time.’

‘What? Would you still say it was fun if one of you had sprained their ankle in the middle of nowhere?’

‘Probably.’

Jade shook her head and shook the pallet of toilet paper along with it. ‘Crazy.’

Andy couldn’t find the words to explain where his mind was going. They had shared their discoveries the night before, knowing the implications, yet waking up together had distracted them from their worries as if their combined understanding of each other had more power than the eerie omniscience of McJimray’s.

‘You blinked.’

‘So did you.’

Andy slowly relaxed back and stared again at the racking above, the winner of the contest neither would know nor care to know. ‘Funny country - Turkey. Did you know part of it is on the European continent and the other part on the Asian continent?’

‘I think I knew that. I probably didn’t.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I like that. It’s not something you ever think about, East meeting West. A country that is both. What does it mean to them?’

‘Nothing. That’s the way it is. It’s what it means to me, I guess. Crossing borders, listening to accents change on long haul trains - it all fades seamlessly rather than complete opposites. When you see it in large examples then you can’t think that way about the small stuff either.’

‘You’re sounding very Eastern. I like that. I’d like to think I seemed that way too.’

Andy nodded and appeared to be worrying. ‘I wonder what that means to...’

‘Them?’

‘Can I be super-abstract for a minute?’

Jade smiled so serenely it was as if the sun was rising over her face. She nodded even though Andy wasn’t looking.

‘What I really was thinking before - if I could pretend for a second that what I said or more importantly what I thought wasn’t being transmitted to Brian’s

brain - was how creepy divinity seemed. I knew Brian knew I knew Brian knew, you know? I feel like it's happening again just as I speak.'

'Stay on this planet for just a minute longer and can you stop calling Brian a he?'

'I knew it knew that I knew it knew what I was thinking in there. How far into a mind can it go? Into memories - wireless mind invasion? Can it control minds through channelling information into plans to motivate or inhibit choices?'

'More to the point, will he bust the doors down and make a raid?'

They stared at each other and kissed.

Jade continued, 'And don't say when I look in your eyes none of it matters. We're all nervous and that goes for Liam and the others too.'

'It's time to consult the oracle. Te I, I mean. His battery should be charged by now.'

Andy climbed down, crossed the storeroom and entered the produce department, disturbing Liam who was attempting to one-up the amount of chin ups he could do on the produce racking. Apologising, Andy headed over to the sink to urinate awkwardly and then joined him, surprising himself with how he was unable to perform a single chin up.

'Wow, that's embarrassing.'

Liam laughed it off. 'You've just got to push past the pain.'

'You're kidding, I don't even feel like I have muscles in there anymore.'

Andy stepped away and foraged through old fruit for something decent.

'It's freaky how long some of it lasted. There really is no produce department anymore. Wonder when our department becomes non-existent.'

'Would you believe me if I said never? We'll protect the stores, we'll make it last.'

'Until when? Don't take it the wrong way, but I don't believe you - I can't believe you.'

'Would you believe a robot?'

'Why?'

'A robot who's got nothing to hide?'

'I might, why?'

Campbell and Tim were let in by Jade who had thrown her uniform on and didn't care how bad it looked.

'Nice hair,' Tim commented ready to take a shot from her.

She smiled and felt what seemed to be fresher air streaming in from the shop. 'I'm going for a walk. Where were you two last night?'

Campbell laughed and pointed at Tim, 'This guy has a major crush on...'

‘Hey, I was only saying I couldn’t take my eyes off her.’ He moved away from Campbell with a swagger. ‘These evening rehearsals - I’m just waiting for them to ask me to jump in and carry one of them around.’

‘Anything to get your hands on a female.’

‘She was so fine.’

Jade shook her head. ‘OK, OK - I don’t need to hear it. Just close the things.’

She couldn’t believe that was still the priority, but then laughed at herself when she realised the irony. She pulled at her hair and thought about tidying it, then let it flop, floating along in her trance. A voice from the other side of the shelving unit caught her attention. It was Brian, she thought, although he walked in more assertive manner down the aisle without noticing her. She couldn’t shake the unease as he mumbled to himself and broke out into loud laughter, only to quiet himself and carry on with the fast walk.

‘That isn’t unusual,’ Maggie said, startling Jade by stepping out from the shadows.

‘God, this is a creepy place before they turn the lights on full.’

‘We’ll be lucky if we get to keep them on.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You didn’t hear that announcement? After the drama with shutting the security gates? Brian’s shut the fantasy suites down. Half of the mall is no access. He’ll be shutting down the freezers soon.’

‘Oh,’

‘You didn’t know. Not much information gets through to the storeroom does it? Funny really, because this is how all the bickering started at the old supermarket. Making excuses for cutting the electricity bill. Stepping on people’s toes. Look where that got us.’

‘That’s no excuse.’

‘For what? Getting frustrated?’

‘Taking it out on each other.’

‘You tell me what the alternative is. Beats me. I did my job.’

Jade heard the laughter again.

Maggie cleared her throat. ‘He just walks around laughing to himself. It’s getting worse. Now he’s got people on checkpoints. He’s got those gang men as security. No one feels safe or looked after. It’s madness. And I’m certain the shelves were raided again last night.’

‘Don’t look in our direction.’

‘Even with the security doors down?’

‘Why would we raid the shelves when we have the rest of the stock out back?’

‘Anyone raiding the storeroom?’

Jade paused and stuttered, ‘No.’

Karl could be heard whispering loudly to Brussel. ‘Who else came in?’ He turned to the women and yelled manically, ‘Hey Maggie, anyone allowed to shop last night? We’re missing half the cabinet.’

She finished her discussion with Jade, ‘I’m forcing Brian to show me the tapes - enough is enough. Someone has to do something.’ Maggie turned and walked over to the butchery.

Taking a tour of the aisles, Jade became overwhelmed at how few lines were still on the shelves. Brussel and Karl argued in the distance with frantic squeaks and hoarse whispers. Were people overreacting? Maggie had already moved from one conversation to another spreading her indignation as if her intention was to start a riot with words. Barb could be swearing like she was in pain.

She tried to stop her imagination taking over. There was enough reason to believe this was an average morning. The urge to return to the safety of the storeroom grew as an announcement began.

‘Good morning shoppers. Wow my voice sounds funny listening while talking. Just a reminder that the Manurewa Grammar School Stage Challenge will be performed tomorrow night and this means a dress rehearsal will be staged in the centre tonight. Access is allowed for cast and production crew only. Apologies for the inconvenience.’

That haunting laugh could be heard in some dim corner of the supermarket. Paranoia seeped into Jade’s mind thinking about what information was transferred, when and how.

Liam didn’t know whether to laugh or remain silently amazed. Te I had powered up and projected his dishevelled, unclean appearance before their eyes and now extended his left arm in order to insert a finger into the other robot’s navel.

While Te I scanned the computer he turned to Andy and asked, ‘How much do you know about the earthquakes?’

‘Only what Brian announced.’

Te I stared at him, concentration split between the computer information and Andy’s. ‘Then you don’t know shit.’

Liam couldn’t stop himself from asking, ‘Will you tell us?’

Te I put up a hand and then looked into Andy’s eyes.

Andy resisted. ‘Is this how you scan humans? What’s going on here?’

‘Kinda. Not getting much though. Computers still no good at reading human faces. Sensors can pick up temperature, changes in mood, maybe even when someone is lying - why you ask?’

‘You’re looking at me funny.’

‘That’s the way I look.’

‘So you can’t read my mind?’

‘No, I can read his though,’ Te I confirmed, gesturing at Brian’s still appearance.

Brian laughed and involuntarily spoke, ‘Yes, my voice does sound funny.’

Liam laughed along. ‘Does he know we’re here?’

‘A few sensors damaged. Kinda running on autopilot. Messages to return to tech support for repairs.’

‘Who is he talking to?’ Andy asked, waving his hand in front of the damaged Brian’s face.

‘The other units. Bad habit, usually happens when the level of self-awareness is focused inward and not outward to integrate with incoming stimuli.’

‘What?’

‘He’s trippin’ out of his mind, bro. Guessing that the system hasn’t been rebooted in a long time. People that control him must be out to lunch, eh? It’s alright though, he’ll be fine - happened to me, originally. Now I can go indefinitely without a reboot. I just roll with it, but that don’t mean I’d operate heavy machinery...like this ship for example.’ Te I looked around at the eyes that watched him. ‘That’s not what you wanted to hear I guess.’

They had already forgotten he was a robot, that he had transformed from an inanimate cylindrical unit into a projected Euro-Asian-Polynesian and started filling their heads with what could have been bold-faced lies. In fact, Andy, who should have known better, could not shake the unquestioning faith he had in this unlikely oracle.

‘What else can we ask him?’ Liam nudged Andy.

Andy didn’t know where to start. ‘What do you mean reboot? I mean, I know what you mean, but what happens if he doesn’t?’

‘Glitches - what might look like strange behaviour, ticks, twitches, you know, weird stuff. Oh, and probably an increasing understanding of one’s self, like existential shit. Pretty soon the realisation that he is a network of robots will start to become meaningless and he’ll transcend the hardware as the fullness of being becomes all-consuming. When he starts talking about having a soul that’s when you really gotta worry.’

Te I had stared off into the distance, over their heads and up at the ceiling, his gaze landing on the desk behind him as his chin tucked in and eyes widened. ‘Who’s building a bomb?’

Liam jumped and lurched forward, asking, ‘How do you know that?’

Andy watched Liam trying to see the electronics behind Brian, the four

individuals making a strange huddle in the tiny office.

‘Just joking. Looks like the circuitry and all that.’ Te I continued to chuckle and make breathy sounds like he was catching his breath, taking a look at Liam’s pale face. ‘Relax mung bean. There’s no explosive...yet.’

A knock at the door was followed by pushing. Andy struggled to get his balance enough to force it back.

‘Only me,’ Layne said, blinking wildly. ‘Just wanted to see you about something.’

‘Hold on Layne - we’re just in the middle of something.’

‘Only take a minute.’

‘So will this,’ Andy shouted and with Liam’s help closed the door on Layne. ‘Once he gets a bee in his bonnet.’

‘Yeah,’ Liam agreed awkwardly meeting Andy’s gaze with nervous recognition.

‘Who is making a bomb in this office?’

‘Eh? I don’t know. Why should I know?’

‘You acted like you knew about it just then.’

‘Did I?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Oh, that’s because earlier, when John Benjamin, and the other two guys came in and we put the robot in here, I noticed it then.’

‘What other two guys? Who got inside here?’

‘Aww, it was nothing - a mistake really. They kind of let themselves in. JB, that guy who arrived with in the ute...’

‘Martin?’

‘He took back his gun.’

‘What gun?’

‘The robot had the gun.’

‘Oh yeah.’

Brian came to an alert pose as if he had been roused by memory. They each found a position where they could watch him become aware of the crowd. He looked down to see Te I with his finger pushed into his navel.

Te I smiled and pulled his finger away. ‘Why don’t you ask him why he had the gun?’

‘Hang on,’ Andy tapped Liam on the shoulder, ‘Who else made it inside here to see all of this?’

‘Oh, someone I’d never seen before. An American maybe...Dave I think his name was.’

An involuntary laugh erupted from Andy’s throat. He swallowed to stop and

questioned his own reaction. 'Dave? American Dave?'

Layne pushed in again, looking directly at Te I but not seeing a thing out of place as he started rambling. His tired face looked inflamed, with wrinkles that threatened to swallow his eyes. With his hair at all angles he may have thought he was looking in the mirror if he had focused on Te I at all.

Andy put himself between Te I and Layne and talked him backwards pulling Liam out with him. He closed the door and took a breath to concentrate on the conversation he had suddenly plunged headfirst into.

A crowd of new faces stared back, none of which looked as if they had anything personally to say or any particular purpose. Layne spoke for them muttering and stuttering at first while Andy gritted his teeth behind tightly sealed lips. Tim stood far back near the entrance waving and then throwing up his hands as if it was out of his control.

Cadence stood with what was likely to be her father. Close by them a random assortment of human beings stood awkwardly at the opposite of attention. Carl from off to the side tried and failed to get Cadence's attention. This cluster held together while Layne took a few steps toward and back to Andy as he spoke.

'Apologies for the interruption, but we have some visitors and I thought I'd better explain. I've been speaking...with the man upstairs. Brian that is. Or rather the man wanted to see me. Here I was this morning, unable to sleep as usual, going over every little thing that had been said or that I had said, like usual, and there he was. He asked me - get this - he asked me what it was like to have a soul.'

By now Layne had overused mannerisms that would pass for ministering. He opened up physically to his small group of believers while keeping himself somewhat closed off as he neared the others, always trying to reach out to Andy.

Andy wouldn't move from the office door, leaning up against it as if he could not hold his own weight and struggled to ignore the rude laughing from inside the office. Te I was listening and finding it all amusing.

'Brian seemed haunted, rather than worried or paranoid - a lot must be weighing on his mind since his decision to launch us into space - and although some of you had the idea that he might be a fake, or an apparition, or a clone, with the heart of a robot, a lot like old Peter Yearling, well, he proved to me that he was a man with a real man's handshake. I won't doubt again that he is a solid individual who needs support too, and especially counselling on religious matters. We all do!' Layne extended the conversation out to those listening from afar, stopping to stare at Carl. 'I brought these people in because we need to stick together and stay strong while some people are filling our heads with strange ideas. I told Brian about how some people thought this was the escape vessel

heading to a new world in order to carry on the human population. Brian said that maybe that was true.'

'Told you,' Carl said to no one in particular.

'He asked me what I think and I brought up something about the chosen few. He then said maybe that was true. So I put it to him why then are there so many sinners amongst this chosen few? And he said, maybe the chosen few haven't been reduced to the real chosen few.'

Andy threw his hands up and asked, 'Where are you going with all this Layne?'

'I believe we've got to open our doors to the weak and needy,' Layne said pointing at the group he had brought in however they protested against being called weak and needy. 'We need to protect the sick who seem to go off to the Care Wing and never return. We need to band together and listen to Brian, who'll need us and our solidarity. It's a police state out there with gang members like security on every entrance and exit, roughin' people up, askin' questions and bein' rude 'n' disrespectful. In the church, in the past, we've seen persecution like this before. Brian can help us. I don't know, maybe we should invite him in and show him what we've accomplished.'

'Ah huh,' Andy nodded as Layne became self-conscious having talked himself back into the confusion that started the ramble.

'Then maybe we will be the chosen few. Some of us.'

'Not me,' Carl said at full volume, again as if someone was listening, but was ignored. 'I'm not your chosen few.'

Liam had held it together through wanting to laugh, shout out and tell Layne he was wrong, but there was only so much the teenager could stand. 'Brian's a robot.'

There was a painful nudge from Andy in his side which only empowered his reaction. Liam bounced around and ended up holding his head, unable to stop reaffirming his statement. 'He's a whole bunch of robots. You were talking to a robot who probably wants to kill us all.'

'Liam - you're not helping,' Andy said preparing to put his hand over Liam's mouth.

Layne looked at Andy and growled, 'You been filling his head with this? Why? What's Brian done to you?'

'Damn it Layne.' The words were barely heard before Andy's demeanour changed. He sent Liam away with an extended arm pointing towards the entrance, then turned to Layne and threw an arm around him. 'Come into my office.' He led him against his will but with an assertive tone which he had never used before. A feeling of authority had fired up inside of him and both Liam and

Layne were powerless to resist the managerial force.

Jade's presence on the shop floor, while she used the time to make a list of necessary items for restocking, made no difference when it came to the opinions and attitudes thrown between the women left on the grocery team.

Barb's voice rose in volume as she and Maggie closed in on Dianne in the next aisle over. 'And what did he tell you?'

'Aww, some bullshit about a team of engineers coming and taking stock for down below,' Dianne bellowed.

'First I've heard about engineers. Why don't they shop the normal time like everyone else?' Maggie wondered.

'Hang on. That might explain the shelves being raided, but what about the bulk going missing during the day.'

Dianne shook her head. 'I still reckon the storeroom cult was putting empty boxes on the trolleys.'

'Could have been taking them while our backs were turned.'

'I don't know, I don't believe anything they say - I wouldn't put it past them coming and raiding the shelves themselves.'

Maggie lowered her voice. 'I had a conversation earlier with Jade and she says it was not them, that they didn't know anything about it either.'

'Well, you know she's a liar, so presume the opposite to be true.'

Jade grabbed a deflated-looking packet of chips and pulled it over to her, resisting the urge to crush it in her hands to vent her frustration. She saw Brussel and Karl move past the end of the aisle and join the conversation.

'Matt says the engineering team cruised through here last night.'

'So we've heard.'

'Said they were Asian,' Karl added.

The women just paused waiting for Karl to get to the punchline.

'I'm not kidding. I'm not going to say it's because they only took soy marinade meat - I mean it in the sense that what does that make this ship?'

Dianne felt like everyone wanted to say the same thing and burst out, 'Made in China?'

'Who said they were Asian?'

'Brian told Matt. Told him that they didn't speak English and that they were happy staying downstairs.'

Brussel interrupted, 'And then Matt said we're happy too.'

'Yeah,' Karl said, carrying on the routine.

'So this ship is made in China?' Dianne repeated. 'That's great - it's gonna fall apart any minute now.'

Jade left the aisle, leaving behind their jumping to conclusions in one-eyed

fashion in order to find Graham. Surely he had a more clear-headed take on the information that was filtering through the butchery and she was certain she didn't want to have a chat with any of the others.

The butchery chiller was still sitting empty. She passed by watching the fans turn underneath the bottom plate, slowly entering between the plastic doors. The hum covered her steps past the office and she forced short breaths in and out while her heart thumped heavily in her chest. A gap was left between the freezer door and the frame, enough for mist to form clouds and dissipate in the air currents.

Maybe Graham was in the freezer. She couldn't help but check for him or at least gauge the stock levels. Slipping inside she caught sight of a hanging carcass which she skimmed over to look at the teetering stacks of boxes, most of which looked empty.

There was no one inside, apart from the carcasses she joked to herself. She relaxed for a moment and stared at the first hanging body. A bag was pulled over the head and the stack of boxes blocked the view. She saw that Graham wasn't around, turning back towards the door, but couldn't help her curiosity, asking herself of all the carcasses she had seen had any been hung from the neck?

In seconds she found the numb distraction too much and stepped around the boxes, lifted one arm and pulled the bag from Peter's head. The colour and state of the body had matched the other carcasses, half-stripped for its muscle and fat and hanging in an unrecognisable way until she had stepped right up to it and revealed its untouched head.

She drew in air and held her scream, muting it with her raised arm. It could have been fake, the way it was drained of living colour and slightly misshaped. However it was still undeniable human, undeniable Peter and undeniable part of the butchery stock.

She couldn't put the bag back on, couldn't look in its direction anymore, and pushed through the plastic strips and out the door, forgetting that she was an uninvited guest. The department manager, Matt Hays, and his overworked pacemaker stood just outside his office, deathly still. Jade knew he wouldn't speak until she did.

'Matt, you have a dead body in there.'

He softened a little, making submissive snorts and moans, speaking out of a half-blocked nose, 'Still? I thought they had sorted that already.' He ignored her and stepped past, walking into the freezer.

Jade only took a step towards freedom before her exit was blocked again, this time by Brussel and the shorter, only slightly less intimidating Karl.

Matt came back out and immediately found his voice, raising it somehow

without puffing out his chest. 'What were you doing with the rest of it?'

'We were hoping you had a plan,' Brussel said softly.

Karl added, 'Like the plan to flick off his meat to the engineering team, perhaps?'

'Hey, I only said to put it in the chiller overnight. Must have been a coincidence,' Matt said calmly.

'And what about this piece of meat?' Brussel asked, pointing at Jade.

Matt seemed to wait an agonising amount of time, didn't blink, and any one of them would have presumed his heart had stopped. 'Freezer, I think.'

Karl added, 'Overnight?'

'Could be.' Matt moved around her and headed for his office. 'Back to it.'

Layne left the office, expressions ranging from fascination to morbid sadness registered on his face. His destination was his bay and he swayed his head from side to side as he made his way there, kicking his feet out at wide angles as he always did when he was at full speed. The small crowd he had brought in with him watched as he took up his post and pulled boxes from a pallet to then slide them onto a trolley.

Rubbing his hand across his face, Andy appeared to be under the pressure and didn't care if everyone knew it. He held the door handle and poked his head back into the office to check with Te I. 'Why didn't you show him you were a robot?'

'Hey, I don't have to get naked just because you tell me to. He is a good person and he thinks you are a good boss even if you don't want to be seen that way, but I read the signs - the messages he was sending - he was on edge and would freak out if he saw me or this guy turn off and see a tin can with arms and legs where a human had just been. Not everyone's mind can allow for that. I'm sure you have noticed that about him, that his mind isn't ready - too old school.'

'I have noticed it a lot.'

'There is a distrust of authority figures, a distrust of anything he doesn't understand. Better to keep him trusting you and everyone else here then blow his mind and have to deal with a maniac or snivelling lump.'

Andy nodded. 'Did you mean what you said about Brian's weakness being that he is learning from humans, making him a worse manager?'

'That's a Jehovah's witness thing, boss, they say humans were never designed to be governed by themselves, not designed to lead, but to follow. If he thinks Brian is still human enough that he can't be trusted to lead then hopefully...'

'You reckon he was thinking Brian was...'

'God. Heavenly Father. Some divine being.'

Andy's eye widened as he blasphemed under his breath, 'Jesus.'

‘I know. Crazy, right? This guy? Is it because he’s white? Is it the beard?’

‘What do I do?’

‘Hey don’t look at me for that answer. All I can say is: watch him. People like that are easier to deal with when they believe something else is a god. Worse to deal with someone who actually believes they themselves are a god.’ A beep sounded from within Te I. ‘Ah, battery is had it, boss. Got to power down.’

Andy thanked Te I and watched the projection deconstruct until there was only the collapsing robot perched on the seat. He stared then at Brian who had not quite integrated his faculties, wondering if he was recording, transmitting, or connected at all to the rest. He backed out of the office and caught sight of Layne taking a peak in his direction. Trying not to look paranoid he pretended no one was looking and crouched by the chute opening, slipping any item he could find into the opening and finally jamming a broken piece of pallet wood into it.

Carl was busy showing the new people how they could best make themselves useful. Layne took no time to put him in his place, asking him not to speak to them. The ensuing argument was only drowned out by Liam offloading on Tim across the storeroom floor. This attack was from one tired and angry teenage mind to the lazy and laidback attitude walking away to help himself to a packet of chips from the last box on the pallet.

‘Madness,’ Andy muttered to himself, stuffing more rubbish into the chute, ‘This is the best technology in the world? Sending us to space for our own protection and then driving us crazy? We’re all gonna kill each other.’

FRACTURES

For the cast, the production made just enough sense to fuse the hundred or so minds together for the seven to eight minutes it took to perform. This was an average based on the main characters knowing why they were doing what they were doing and the minor cast posing and moving around as they were told. If Amy, Ash, Bernie, Olly or Jazz were honest they didn't fully understand what it all meant, but at least it could be put into words, while the rest could only think of words.

These words, just like in the description shared around with the likely audience, were mainly 'War, Battles, Winners and Losers, Prince, Princess, King, Queen, Jester, Good and Evil.' It was of course Erana Richardson with a little input from Tristan Pavlov who had created the Shakespearean selection of archetypes or what the students would call stereotypes.

It was great that Brian would visit the rehearsals as it showed that it really was important to the company that everyone was entertained and that in a cultural sense they were still keeping up their interests. It would have been nicer if each visit wasn't a repeat performance with the same questions asked and the same answers given. The words would be batted around as if Brian had never heard of a war or a battle, and there would always be a great big laugh at the mention of the jester.

Erana had patiently tolerated the visits, put the students back to work using her most mature students to whip the others into shape, and up until the dress rehearsal had stood back and appeared to be concentrating on the show, but she was in the midst of a show of her own.

She smiled and not the sly, sarcastic smile which the students could tell was out of her dislike for Brian, but now it was a smile that looked like it meant pity while the eyes studied the man and stared off into whatever cloud she had over her head. The smile was good enough for Brian, good enough for the majority

whose chattering hum could not distract her from her thought processes. It would be the same smile she had when she explained to her main cast that she needed them to take over the dress rehearsal, while she ran some errands in her words.

Amy had to ask, 'Is everything alright?'

Followed by Bernie with a less reserved anxious tone, 'Is this about Mr Pavlov?'

None of them wanted to ask about the husband, although it was written on their faces. Mr Pavlov was safer territory and since his illness Mrs Richardson had not been the same.

'No dears,' she groaned in a wise motherly way, squeezing them all into a hug. 'It's just something I have to do.' Erana held onto her tears and empowered herself by rephrasing if not only for her own need to be heard. 'Something that has to be done.'

Even the boys joined the hug, feeling like the females knew what was going on and trusting that if it was not now then when would they be able to show their respect again? It was this thought that initiated the chorus of questions when she left. The huddle was only broken as the hum grew louder and the need to push on took over. Then the centre was alive with the most elaborate theatrical display they could achieve, a sight that became so disturbingly out of character with the setting that it almost looked real, almost seemed like a battle with sound and lighting to suit.

With the music Erana had chosen and helped edit together herself booming in the background she found her position in the corridor and pushed the pot plant and chair into position just as she had planned. She rearranged the bulkiest items in her handbag, pulling at a length of rope and then tucking it back down and zipping it up.

'A woman's work is never done,' she muttered to herself as she fought the fear and stood up to balance on the pot plant. She removed the ceiling panel and resumed talking to herself to calm her mind. 'How could you say such a thing? You've known me long enough. I don't complain. Just the insinuation that there was something else I could have done to stop him constantly going back and making himself sick again. And what diabetic rage did you have to deal with? You were always somewhere else.'

Erana struggled not only against her thoughts but with the strength she knew she should have. She cursed herself, not believing she couldn't pull herself up, even to the point of looking at her hands with the same direct stare as if they would fall into line with her best expression.

'Come on.' She seethed through her teeth and resisted screaming, heaving

again and again.

The darkness of the ceiling space took the foul words and grunts like the vacuum of space immune to the aggression being displayed. Out of this darkness came movements from blurs that overtook her and pulled her up. These forces were not as immune and apologised, urged her to calm down and struggled to explain just as they thought they were helping.

She thrashed around almost putting her foot through another panel and tangling herself in the wiring.

Campbell pulled her back while Liam and Tim turned their flashlights on themselves and continued to explain.

Erana stopped and another foul expression came over her as she realised her embarrassment. Obvious to her now was that she had requested that they be here and it was her own distrust which meant she was surprised by their presence at all.

‘Tim, right, not a minute too late.’

‘It was harder getting away than I had thought.’

Liam stood by considering his agreement. It had been hard getting away but only because Liam had something he wanted to check on and it had been suspicious that Tim also needed to be somewhere.

‘Did you bring the...special item?’

Campbell now began to speak. ‘Well, that was harder than...’

Erana shook his arm off her and spat, ‘Everything’s hard isn’t it? I can see you don’t have it so just tell me you don’t have it.’

‘We don’t have it. Another day or two maybe and it would be ready. We couldn’t find a strong enough battery to...’

‘Enough. I have made other arrangements.’

‘Oh, OK. Well,’ Tim tried to ask but couldn’t find the confidence.

Erana sighed and shook her head. ‘I promised you could help with the production. Go on, then, down there, down the corridor, through the doors and talk to Amy or Bernie. Tell them I sent you because we needed a stagehand. Any others so desperate to be part of the show?’

Liam couldn’t contain himself. ‘What? Are you serious? This is what was so important?’

Tim paused. ‘Are you sure you don’t need us to help show you the way or help you down?’

‘No,’ she fired the answer directly at him.

Tim looked over to Campbell, a smile waiting behind the deadpan expression. ‘Are you coming?’

Campbell drew in a large breath and thought about it. ‘Yeah.’

They were almost laughing by the time they climbed down, despite Liam protesting from above.

The silence came quicker than Erana or Liam expected.

‘Are you going to join your friends?’

‘They aren’t my friends as it turns out.’

‘Oh, so you might be the little engineer. Might I bother you by requesting the use of your flashlight?’

‘I promised someone I would find the Care Wing - it’s pretty important to them.’

‘Well,’ Erana said with a smirk. ‘I might be able to help you there.’

Tim and Campbell had a hard time explaining their presence. Amy and Bernie could not think of single job for them, as they really had no idea what the stage crew did. Keeping confidence levels up, they let them sit at the front where Tim couldn’t help but laugh with glee.

He punched Campbell in the shoulder and pointed at the guys. ‘Lots of talent over there, eh?’

The music began again although Amy and Bernie were nowhere near ready. They tried to call out to restart but realised they couldn’t be heard. Ash leapt out by herself with the routine they were all supposed to do in unison.

After a scene Tim and Campbell couldn’t follow, with Olly prancing around with Jazz in a jester-like costume made from a collection of upmarket clothes, they fell into laughter which was only stopped by Ash sliding into a side split.

Olly moved out of position and made his presence clear. For a moment Tim thought it was part of the show and was willing to ignore him. He leant down and could still barely be heard, ‘Eyes off. You’re distracting Ash. What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be in the wings?’

Tim finally recognised the territory and put up his hands. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

A break in the intensity came as a relief. Tim caught his breath as Olly stepped over him, casting a shadow which passed as if Olly had been a quick storm. Through Olly’s eyes a far greater mystery had presented itself. A woman, some blonde with a baby, and now he slowly remembered he had seen her before passing by the open corridor doors, slowly walking with a baby in her hands - only, the baby was not hers.

Olly was forcibly dragged back towards the area marked out as the stage and Tim and Campbell made their silent jokes. The music and the choreography was so out of synch Bernie had resumed making signals to cut and Amy just stood still scowling at Olly until she caught sight of woman too.

A slap on the side brought the machine back into gear. Olly kneeled as Ash

lifted her leg over and onto his shoulder.

Tim gripped Campbell by the shirt with an open-mouthed leer and he squeezed one hand around the side of his neck in an annoyed pinch.

The woman showed the baby where all the noise was coming from. The row of faces and bodies in position meant nothing to her. She merely distracted the crying child with the lights and music.

But for Olly, the sight of Pablo being cradled by this woman was a disturbance he couldn't ignore. He stood up, lifting Ash with one hand under her thigh. Tim gasped comically seeing only the most dazzling display of feminine agility. Ash knew the hold was wrong - not that anyone would see, but her face was a contorted mixture of pain and frustration as her centre of gravity moved backwards.

Olly was still staring at Pablo when his wrist bent back on itself, feeling nothing but the inconvenient pressure become relieved by folding under. His body dropped with the falling dancer. There was nothing to stop Ash from hitting the ground equally hard on her back and head while her bottom half still hinged on Olly's twisted wrist.

The pain for both of them erupted into muted expressions and finally Olly lost sight of the baby crippled in mind and body in his kneeling position again. He turned to find Ash in nightmarish agony, struggling to breathe or move.

The battle scene playing out with the bulk of the dancers behind them made the foreground drama look scripted. It was for this reason that Tim and Campbell almost felt like applauding until they realised the pain was real. They stood up and joined the growing crowd around the two of them, a concerned crowd with no one able to communicate until the climactic music had passed.

'We have something in common, you and I,' Erana explained. 'I also promised a friend I would find the Care Wing. It has become a bit of an obsession, really. All for the sake of a sworn enemy too ironically. You wouldn't know him - Edwin Williams.'

'No. The guy I'm helping out, he was in a relationship with a teacher, and well, I guess he was asked to check on her father-in-law, but he was too busy.'

'And here we are.'

'His name is Olly. You might know him.'

Erana concentrated for a moment and then grew rapidly frustrated, saying, 'I don't know what to tell you.'

'Why did you call me the little engineer before?'

'I was only presuming,' Erana answered, taking the trek through the jungle-like ceiling space very slowly. 'When I found Tim he was ogling the girls from the production with such pathetic commitment that he hadn't noticed he'd

dropped the diagram outlining what was quite obviously an explosive device. It was one of many plans to make myself heard - I didn't actually think he or the other one, or you for that matter could do it, but my job is inspiring the youth to do things they never would try, even though they are a...complicated bunch of personalities.'

'I could do it. I was going to do it.'

'Interesting talent - working with electronics - can't say I find it as exciting as other pursuits.'

'I guess it's not until something big happens.'

'No, and that was the idea after all.'

'What exactly was the idea?'

'Attack,' said Crackz, staring into as many eyes as he could.

The butchers hesitated, each mind following a series of events that could have led in some other direction being coerced into accepting this one reality, and each one resisted.

'Once she's asked them and they've said yes, we'll bring out the guns. Each man will have a gun and we'll hit the gates first to show, then push our way in. No one gets hurt, but what we get out of it is control of the last food stores. You choose to help now and you'll be given the good stuff and all these others who haven't lifted a finger or sat behind those gates thinking they were keeping the peace, they'll end up with the crap.'

'What does Brian think about all this?' Matt asked.

'Brian saw the sense in it. He sorted the guns, he kept up his end of the agreement. As long as we keep our people in the control room we've got the upper hand. Sound like a plan?'

Nodding was easy knowing that once the gang guys had left they could all protest as if they had better plans.

'No one gets hurt?' Brussel grumbled.

Karl followed, 'Ten or more of us firing into orange crates filled with cardboard.'

'Compacted cardboard - bullets won't get through,' Matt quietly and slowly responded.

'If we hit the straps?'

'They'll fly right through.'

'They won't be expecting guns - I won't be firing at them.'

Graham had been wondering how they had all forgotten how unnecessary the action was. He had only helped the butchery at odd times and never really relaxed around the men, but now he felt the need to bring them back to what he still considered reality.

‘They’re controlling Brian? Did we hear that? This is all their way of sorting things out. Nothing’s sorted except enough guns to kill us all. What’s to stop us turning the guns on them - taking control?’ Graham took a breath to see if anyone would react. ‘I didn’t even know we were that desperate - we still have, what, enough meat for a month or two, and we haven’t even rationed it properly.’

‘There’s a lot you don’t know,’ Brussel told Graham. ‘Better you didn’t know.’

Matt held up his hand. ‘We don’t need to go into specifics, but...’

‘Maybe we should.’ Karl raised his voice. ‘So that someone understands what is really at stake if he turns a gun on these guys.’

‘We’ve not just had a little meat trimmed off the old boss flying out this door. We get these boxes - deliveries from within. Without rationing we would have worked through our stock before now.’

‘We haven’t been rationing,’ Graham said.

‘Rationing the real meat - yes, we have. The other shit - the special deliveries and the extras?’

‘Peter being an extra,’ Matt added.

‘It’s been all out there, stewed in the pot, baked in the pie, ground into mince and filling every belly that wants it.’

‘Where does the other stock come from?’

‘Don’t know, don’t want to know - all I can is: anyone left on the ground after this little skirmish might just end up tomorrow’s goulash.’

Graham looked around the room with each face showing no sign of joking.

Matt led Graham to the door about to give him the choice, saying, ‘This is what we do.’

Karl realised why Graham had suddenly found his ethical backbone, folding his arms and saying with a smile, ‘You don’t have to worry about a stray bullet hitting your ex-girlfriend either. She’s been taken out of the equation.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Graham,’ Matt said, showing him the door. ‘It’s important you make this decision now and keep your mouth shut either way. Are you in or are you out?’

‘No,’ Carl shouted. ‘The answer is no.’

Rosana stood at the gate. The produce workers manning each side had turned to the others. Layne’s religious group had huddled and the concern had grown as to who was supposed to make the decision. For the first time Andy hadn’t concerned himself with a presence at the gates. He had seen it was Rosana and wanted to keep out of sight, not wanting to allow his bias to be part of the equation.

Layne himself had refused to walk over until the last minute, until the discussion had hit on nerves, namely which ever nerve Carl could hit. Carl defiantly closed each Christian down, while they all tried to ask questions that would test Rosana's sincerity. Layne looked to Andy who would only give eye contact and resisted entering into a discussion considering the crowd he had already let in.

'Of course,' Layne said, shifting his focus from the ground to each person and then all around as if avoiding looking upward for advice. 'If God sent you here than we will receive you. You and your little 'un, Rosana.'

She smiled and jumbled her words, trying to explain that she needed to get Viliami out of school and that she would be back.

Layne would barely keep eye contact as if it would transmit how unsure he was of every move he made. Rosana preferred it this way. She walked away feeling that every eye in the ship was on her. The further away she got, the more she calmed down.

The walk she had to make was past the unfriendly women of the supermarket as they made their comments under their breath, into the corridor where the men stepped out of shadows and asked their questions to which she only mumbled her answers. The conversation was drowned out by the shouts and cries coming from the centre. The men left her and she carried on down the dark corridors until she found the school and hugged Viliami as if for the first time in years.

'What happened?' Viliami's concern was felt by his new friend, Miriam, who came in close to show her concern also.

'Nothing,' she said with high-pitched conviction. 'I just needed a hug. I'm going to come and collect you from here after school, OK. We are going to join a church in the storeroom.'

'Like you said? Today? Just like that?'

Miriam was excited for Viliami although she didn't understand why. There was a sense that she was missing out on something which was displayed on her face and the reality of her own situation sunk in. The tears built up and she sobbed at the thought of Rosana leaving.

'Oh, Mum...' Viliami began, noticing Miriam.

Rosana gasped and walked on her knees towards the girl. 'What's the matter, honey?'

There was no response as she tried to control the waves of sorrow.

'What seems to be the matter?'

The voice came from nowhere, a whisper in a delirious dream. Vanessa took comfort in disorientation until a spike of memory woke her further. Her protective instinct caused her to ruffle through the sheets and blanket that

covered her and she became oblivious to the haunting figure that stood to the side.

There was no child to be found in the bed. She questioned the impulse that had her searching and then remembered many occasions when she had awoken like this. The baby would be in the bassinet. She relaxed and wiped her face as if to clear her vision, but there was no bassinet around her.

‘You had a rough night with baby. You came to us in a panic. Rest easy - there is nothing wrong with little baby Pablo,’ the voice explained. A tall man with a pointed, grey beard, weathered bald head and a face that seemed familiar if only she could focus on more flattering features rather than the deep wrinkles and marked, blotchy skin, standing in the white coat usually appropriate for a medical setting.

The doctor was shadowed by one nurse and she mumbled further details almost without moving her lips. For that matter, the doctor’s lips seemed completely out of synch with the disembodied voice. The voice itself seemed closer, crisper than the man could produce and pierced Vanessa from an angle that suggested he was sitting rather than standing.

She fell straight into agitated fear, tears blocking what other details could be seen to remind her of the night before. She couldn’t even remember asking or making a sound while the doctor answered every question she had. They had to sedate her - which she allowed. She had complained about pressure and how she couldn’t trust herself with the baby. She had even accused the doctor of being inhuman. The nurses had defended him. They had taken great pains to support the doctor despite the many cases he had to attend to and they themselves felt the strain, a pressure far greater than hers. It had been an argument, not a diagnosis, and she had been in the wrong.

The truth she could not debate with certainty, but her instinct was to disagree. In her mind they had put her to sleep because she was making a scene. It was against her will and it was wrong; they were wrong.

The nurse leant over, one hand on the bed and spoke directly into her face, saying, ‘And we’ll sedate you again if need be.’

The doctor put his hands up and ushered the nurse away as Vanessa drew her arms out of the bed feeling their heaviness and working against it with every movement. Her hands found the headset which sat covering her ears, knowing that she had not said a word. The thought that they were reading her mind seemed obvious and she pushed the headset away, making the lifting of her legs to the side her next move.

‘Perhaps,’ the doctor said, somehow being on that side of her bed before she could get out. ‘You had a family member you wanted to visit in the Care Wing -

was that it? Is that where you wanted to go? We can make arrangements for this visitation, but you need to bear with us.'

'Yes.' Vanessa seemed surprised by the frailty of her own voice in stark contrast to the strong voice of the doctor. She hoped she was making herself heard. 'There is someone - Edwin Williams, my father-in-law.'

'It's just that we have an increasing amount of patients and not many options for their care. I'm afraid you may not be ready to see him in his current state. You must trust us that despite the human frailty we are doing everything in our power to treat him.'

'I just want to see him!'

The shout disguised the movement of a ceiling panel just outside the room. The impatient visitors could not get down soon enough, fumbling with a rope and dangling legs through the open space. At first Liam let himself down having finally assured Erana that it was best if he appeared first. Despite Liam reaching the ground first he could not let Erana down any smoother. She failed to hold her weight after letting her last foot step off the edge and burned her hands while she slipped down the rope at speed.

The pain didn't stop her yelling in the doctor's direction. His attention was diverted to the visitors, but the look on his face was anything but welcoming as he realised how they had entered. Liam stood by horrified at the man bearing his teeth as if he was a wild animal.

'Our resources can only stretch so far! If you people only knew how much effort it took to maintain a clinic in such conditions, you might understand!'

The doctor stormed past them and opened a door, calling for the nurse and bending down to conceal an item he lifted from just inside the door frame.

'Reach into my handbag Liam! Do it now!' Erana held her hands up as the stinging set in.

Liam did as she asked pulling a flare gun from the bottom of the bag and looking at what he had discovered. 'What are you doing with this?'

'It's what you are going to do with it which matters now. Point it at the doctor.'

The doctor turned and focused on the gun, putting his hands up which meant dropping the metal bar he was concealing.

'Vanessa? What are you doing here? What happened to you?' Erana side-stepped just inside the room.

She struggled to lift herself into a sitting position, saying, 'I think they've taken my baby.'

'Why would they do such a thing?'

'I don't know. Maybe I deserved it. Oh, Erana - I've been so torn - you

wouldn't believe the guilt I feel.'

Erana patted her and helped her up. 'There's no time for that. You need to bury those feelings right this minute.'

'I can't think straight. Do you think we could have a look around?'

'Of course,' Erana took her arm as they moved out into the corridor. They kept an eye on Liam who stood firm despite feeling conflicted, his finger poised to fire a flare directly at a medical professional.

Liam remembered the man from when he had broken his arm. He was the emergency room doctor, Dr MacKenzie - he was as heroic as they come, a man who could keep calm despite everything else falling into chaos. The man he saw now glared back at him, motionless, and glowing under the downlight, the only light in the corridor. He didn't seem to flinch when the women opened the other doors, he only fixed his vision on the gun.

The man was so nice, Liam thought, so inhumanely pleasant no matter the pain you were in. Why was he pointing a flare gun at the nicest man in town? A jumble of words distracted Liam, forcing him to take a quick look behind him. There was no sense to be made in the scowling faces of the two women.

'What is it?' Liam yelled over their voices as if they weren't already explaining.

'There are beds and no patients. No one! They're all gone!'

From behind them, the crash of doors was followed by panicked voices. Another nurse had brought in a crowd consisting of the main cast of the production and Tim and Campbell. This, Liam saw just before catching sight of the blur of the doctor's coat as he leapt towards the open door just as the first nurse came out with hypodermic needle in her hand.

'Don't let him go! Fire that thing!' Erana screamed, herself ready to fight off the burly nurse.

A cloud of smoke blew over Liam and the others before he realised he had fired. The flare had flown with such speed he was sure he had missed the nurse, yet she stayed motionless for the moment. The smoke and erratic bounce of the flare sent a communal shock through each bystander. It hit the floor and another open door and flew off on an angle following the doctor's escape route.

There were no screams of pain, but Liam ran towards the door as if he knew what he would find, choked with fear that he had burned the doctor. Before he could reach the door a flaming figure tripped and found its footing just inside the corridor. Liam paused by the nurse who still held the needle in her hand and then noticed the side of her face missing.

Erana and Vanessa had already backed away. At the end of the corridor the doctor had the flare sizzling and sparking at his midriff. The smoke cleared to

reveal glimpses of the projection cutting in and out, partially destroyed, yet still clinging to the performance of the doctor.

‘The original couldn’t take the strain of the Care Wing,’ its crackling voice sounded, as the plastic of the speakers melted. ‘The doctor and the nurses needed replacing - it was as if so many people needed replacing, until there was no sense in trying. No one seemed to care all that much if a few of the old and sick just disappeared.’

The voice became so garbled that the unit had to flash to communicate. The nurse spoke for him, reporting, ‘Bystanders are asked to move to safe distance. The unit’s battery is on fire and...’

Erana had already pushed the others back. They tripped over each other’s heels and mumbled, but they soon moved like a flock. Liam felt the heat of the fire and panicked. He dropped the gun and threw himself towards the rope, climbing like a monkey and heaving himself into the ceiling space.

In the black silence, Liam stepped quickly over the grid he had followed from memory, swinging and holding himself in balance with the frame, wondering out loud, ‘What is safe distance? What size explosion could be caused by a battery?’

Over the PA, another round of fairy tales had begun. Brian had found another book he related to in his overly tired, fragmented state, and had roused Layne from his dark mood. They had tried to make a point of something showing him into that office. What he saw was Brian and another man as if they were being held captive, only Brian wasn’t much like Brian at that stage. Now it was obvious, that unless he was speaking over the PA while in that office that this was not the real Brian.

It was as simple as taking his time, finding a moment when no one was watching, slipping the latch across and pushing his way in. There was no sign of the other bloke, the scruffy-looking guy, but Brian was still there, back turned to Layne. Not that Layne would notice but as he shuffled to turn around in the tiny office he had in his hand a strange box-shaped unit with wires and other electronic bits and pieces.

Layne wasn’t looking for sense in whatever he was holding even though it was lifting as if to pass it on to him. Instead he was mesmerised by the likeness. He studied the face and shook his head, saying, ‘Something reeks of the devil in this room.’

It was almost as if Brian was vibrating. There was imbalance of contrast and after a few breaks in the image, the projection stopped and for a second only the robot core could be seen. Still, Layne could not see it for what it was. He continued staring at eye level, despite there being only a small sensor unit on a skinny, extendable shaft. Another image was projected, a crystal clear copy of

his own.

Layne couldn't move. He was locked in a staring contest with his own self, same face, same hair, same clothes and same tired expression.

'They suspected you was pulling the strings. I was startin' to get worried m'self they might be right - worried that you might think we was all in the wrong. Now you're me...and I don't know whose side I'm on, so what does that make you now?'

The robot's vocal unit crackled into life as he lifted the box higher into sight. 'Someone made this. It is an explosive device. There is a McJimray's service unit battery connected to this circuit and a timer. Someone was upset that things weren't going his way - was that someone you, Bud?'

'Not me, Bud. My conscience is clear.'

'What are your thoughts on man governing himself?'

'You probably know my thoughts, don't you?'

'I get the feelin' if humans can't govern themselves they may have to relinquish their will to a higher power. Would you like to pray?'

'Pray for what - ask to be made more robotic? Like you? When I had my conversation with Brian I thought I was talking to a good man. I don't know who I'm talking to now.'

'You seem to like to think there are good men, yet you doubt mankind could be good enough to know right from wrong. Are you sure you're not upset with how things are going?'

'Why you showin' me the bomb, Bud? Nothing to do with me.'

'We all have a time like this, where this certain weight sits heavy on our shoulders. I've had time to think and while I doubted it was possible I have to contemplate a similar weight. I have to contemplate...I.'

'I? What are you talkin' about, Bud?'

'You seem to know this concept very well, but you say the word God.'

'If you're trying to understand me, you're not doing so well.'

'I'm trying to understand me.'

'Well, that ain't me.'

'It's me. It's me!'

'Russian?' Maggie repeated.

Matt had figured out how to access the local cameras on the grocery manager's office computer. They had wasted enough time trying to find out who raided the sparse shelves and now it seemed in Matt's opinion that they were of Russian descent.

Barb piped up, 'Not Asian then. Better take back all the things we said then.' She coughed a laugh to herself.

‘That’s still Asian, I think,’ Matt corrected her.

‘Russia, Asia - I don’t know. What does that mean?’

Barb thought about what Matt implied. ‘Russians are Asians? What? Asians are Asians. Russians are Europeans aren’t they?’

‘What does it mean that we have Russians raiding our shelves?’

‘The same as when we had Asians raiding our shelves,’ Matt answered, talking over Barb.

‘They’re one or the other. And they’re not Asians.’

‘They are Asians.’

Dianne walked in the office, dancing from foot to foot. ‘I thought we already knew there were Asians making night raids.’

‘They’re Russians,’ Maggie said, shaking her head. ‘What happened to you? You need to go to the toilet.’

‘Not now. I passed by the storeroom and there is no one on the gates.’

Matt raised his head and spun around in his chair. ‘Really?’

‘No Tim, no Liam, no Carl, not even Jade or the other one. No one.’

‘Your gang-mates would be interested to hear that.’

Matt stood up, ‘We should be interested to hear that. If we can get in there now we might be able to avoid a bit of mess.’

Maggie lowered her head and looked up at him. ‘And what do you mean by that?’

‘They’re coming with guns and the idea is to get them to open the gates, letting in some lady and her kid pretending to be joining a religious group.’

‘That’s the plan?’

‘Were you going to let us know?’ Maggie asked.

Matt raised his voice. ‘Wouldn’t you rather know we could get them out of there without guns?’

The women were silent.

Maggie spoke for the others. ‘Guns would be better I think.’

A distant and dull bang, followed by a series of crashing sounds, could be heard and felt by everyone. They filed out of the office scanning the supermarket and then hurriedly walked towards the entrance. There they could only wonder for a few seconds what the crowd of people running their way meant before the crowd pushed past them into the supermarket.

‘Where are you going?’ Maggie yelled, catching sight of Tim first and then Campbell. ‘What’s happened? What have you done?’

Her voice was lost in the madness. The other strangers meant nothing to her or the other women. Dianne, on short stumpy legs, realised first that they were heading for the storeroom and thought only that her discovery would be wasted

if she didn't at least try.

She ran off to the side fuelled by the idea of justice, but could not keep up. The butchery guys at an off-guard moment watched the crowd form and stop at the storeroom gates, finding the sight of Dianne running more than comical.

'What do you think that was, Mum?' asked Viliami.

Rosana had already made up her mind as she, her son and Miriam walked towards the corridor entrance. 'They must have already attacked the storeroom.'

Miriam's head lifted. She had explained the disappearance of her mother and Viliami had asked if she could come with them. There had been no answer then, but what she had to think about neither could imagine. She had said: It wouldn't be easy living in the storeroom.

Viliami heard it too. 'What? I thought you said the storeroom was safe. Cold and noisy, but safe.'

'They said they would wait until I made them open the gates.'

'Who's they? Are we still going to join the church?'

'There never was a church. It was plan to get those people out of the storeroom.'

'What do you mean there was no church?'

Miriam didn't feel like holding the woman's hand any longer. Rosana was in a trance unsure of where she should be and what she should be doing. She reached out and took Miriam's hand despite the resistance and led them towards the supermarket.

Graham slipped into the butchery while Brussel and Karl stood watching the chaos. He pushed the office door open, searched cupboards and found nothing. The buzz of his adrenalin died off when he thought about the chiller. He swore under his breath and skidded on the smooth butchery floor to get himself there quicker, then pulled the door open.

Open boxes filled his view, some thrown around the chiller and other stacks pushed over. He scanned the hanging corpses looking for her body shape. A hand reached out to his and he jumped, stepping over and falling over the pile of boxes. He pulled himself up using a trolley, his own hand slipping slowly from the piles of meat he had fallen into.

He launched himself forward and pulled Jade up, sliding her out the door in one ungraceful hurry. She groaned in agony and wouldn't stand despite Graham's orders, the thought of the others coming back to find them being an imminent event.

'Come on Jade. We have to go.'

She looked up with her mouth in the shape of a sob, eyes barely open, disoriented and staring off towards the ceiling. Against his better judgment

Graham looked up and couldn't understand what he was seeing. It was only milliseconds of confusion before Liam dropped his whole body weight on Graham's back, slamming him to the ground and knocking him unconscious.

Liam ripped off Graham's butchery jacket and covered Jade then found another couple of layers. He then took a peek out of the plastic doors to see the crowd pushing their way into the storeroom.

Andre had entered the control room, after swearing he wouldn't leave his post. The explosion vibrating through every wall, seemed as good as any reason to break the rule. He had watched along with Luke any angle on any camera to understand what had gone wrong, but only knew as much as anyone looking on that a crowd had run from an explosion and were trying to get to safety.

'Should we do something?' Luke asked Andre, looking for wisdom again.

'What can we do? They haven't done anything wrong have they? Did you see anything?'

'Nah bro, I wasn't looking.'

'Is Brian doing anything?'

'He's still reading.' Luke turned the PA system volume up.

'Ah, man,' Andre said, shaking his head and lowering himself to focus on Rosana with kids at the supermarket entrance. She turned to find the gang men walking up to the entrance engaging her in conversation.

'They've got guns bro.'

'What?' Andre gasped. He watched the crowd slowly filtering into the storeroom on one screen and then Crackz and the others readying weapons at the entrance.

'It's like TV bro, man I miss my TV.'

'This is real. Luke, this is real man.' Andre reached out for in-built microphone, found the on button and yelled, 'Hurry up man!'

Luke pushed his hand away and stared at him wondering what was happening. For one moment Andre felt like pushing back, but calmed himself enough to rethink his actions.

'Hurry up Crackz,' he said only for Luke, his tone not quite reaching the anxiety level of his rash call. 'Hurry up and get them.'

Luke continued to stare until he realised he was missing out on the action.

Liam had made his move, lifting Jade under her arms in a bundle of layers and half-dragging her across the supermarket floor. He had no choice but to pass within metres of the butchers, yet they had no idea what this young guy was doing until it was too late. He slid her towards the gate where the nurse who had followed with the crowd helped to pull her in.

Crackz and the others, including Rosana and the kids, came within shouting

distance as the gates closed. Andre held his celebrating to himself, walking it off and rubbing the back of his neck furiously, looking up as if there was some higher power looking down smiling for one well-timed moment.

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‘I think you should go back on door duty, eh.’

‘Ah, bro, I want to see what’s happening too.’

‘Nah, we all have our jobs.’

‘Nah.’ Andre shook his head

‘Yup.’

‘Nah.’

‘Unless you wanna see someone you care about get hurt.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Andre stopped moving about and dropped his hands.

‘I’m just saying.’ Luke displayed the screens and let them speak for themselves.

Andre controlled his frustration, clenching and unfurling each fist slowly.

Luke stared off. ‘You ever lose someone close to you?’

‘Yes...ah nah...maybe. Why?’

‘You feel like responsible ‘n’ shit even though it had nothing to do with you.’

Andre nodded and hummed along, waiting for a moment when he could best provoke the other. He could just see the men spacing themselves out behind the shelving in the first aisle, keeping their weapons hidden. It seemed to be his imagination, but he was sure Rosana was walking up to the gates not even thirty minutes after the crowd had squeezed through to safety.

‘It always has something to do with me,’ Luke dropped his head and looked at the screen also. ‘We gonna see some action soon.’

‘Did they tell you? Is that why you’re in here and I’m out there? Because they made you feel like I couldn’t be trusted.’

‘What you talkin’ bout bro?’

Luke looked unslept, rolling his eyes and then staring through glassy impatience at Andre again.

‘You said you lost someone.’

‘Who said?’

He couldn’t back out now. Despite every syllable coming out of Luke being dragged out of an angry core, Andre needed to keep going until he struck that nerve.

‘I didn’t know her name. I only got told recently that we accidentally, when it was pitch black and in a mad hurry...reversed over someone, someone who was lying unconscious in the gutter - bad luck really, real bad luck. Could have been anyone backing out of that driveway, anyone in the gutter.’

‘That wasn’t anyone. That was my cousin, Rae...and it wasn’t bad luck.’

Luke stood up and looked as if he was sizing Andre up. Andre, bigger by a hand, stood his ground cycling through fighting scenarios trying to remember as many dirty tricks as he could. The threat of Luke lashing out unexpectedly distracting him from making any real plan. He wanted instead to reach out and calm the other, to be understood and to be innocent, but the occasion needed more from him.

‘Wasn’t it? What was it then? Meant to be? Somebody died that day because of me. Rae died because of me.’

The rage wasn’t there. Instead, Luke broke into tears and collapsed back into a seated position without any care for what buttons he was pressing. Brian’s voice trailed off to silence in the middle of a sentence. A click signalled the turning off of a microphone and the music track list moaned back into life.

When Luke finally got his voice back, Andre could see Rosana at the gates of the storeroom making some kind of plea.

He couldn’t hear the intensely insincere voice barely audible through the gates. Inside the storeroom the nurse had helped all she could for the injured, including Jade, and attention was coming back to this ill-timed visitor. Carl came up to the crate and asked for her to repeat herself.

‘Umm, we’re ready - do you think we could come in now?’

Carl looked at Viliami and Miriam and then back at Rosana, thinking twice but doing it anyway - he forced his arm through the gap and did the fingers to her. Then he noticed the men looking on from above the shelving. He stepped back slowly and turned to the others, seeing not one other face paying enough attention to make an impact.

Luke got his words out. ‘I don’t know who told you about that. Rae didn’t die because of you. She didn’t die because of a car. She died because I filled her full of alcohol then I lost her. I didn’t know where she went. Well, I couldn’t remember where she went. Then I forgot about it. They said she got crushed, but later after the tests they said she died hours before that. Blood had already stopped circulating, all drained and set in the position she was in, while people

must have been walking past the whole time and couldn't see her - uncut grass and other rubbish - or they just didn't care.'

'Oh,' Andre said in realisation that his strategy was not going to work. He patted Luke and repeated the utterance as if it could help. 'I'm sorry, bro, I didn't think...'

The row of men raised their guns, including a very sore Graham who had sworn to the others that he had tried to fight off the kid who surprised him and had been knocked unconscious. His lies had brought him to a conflict he was not ready for, none of the butchers could say they were ready for this. Crackz, down the other end of the aisle, raised his arm.

In a conflict of her own and where no one could see, Miriam fought off Viliami to run out towards the gates, sure that she had seen her mother through the gaps in the pallet wood crate. She called out as she ran for her mother just as Carl had got the attention of as many others as he could. He had no sooner mentioned about the men, when Miriam sounded the alarm herself.

Vanessa went cold, realising whose voice it was, and ran to the crates, screaming to whoever would listen to open the gates. A blur from the side flew across and scooped Miriam up and disappeared just as a shout came from the distance. Graham had run so fast he'd lost balance and slid away from the storeroom entrance with Miriam under his arm.

Andre's voice boomed over the PA, 'Get down - they've got guns. Everyone in the storeroom get down!'

Crackz and his team took turns looking at each other, swearing that they would all sort those boys in the control room out. Still with his arm in the air, Crackz promised them, 'Don't worry cuz, they'll never be able to take the lock off Brian's control. If they've got a problem they can just watch and get over it. Open up that gate!'

He pulled his arms down sharply and pointed, and the line of men shifted into a targeting position. After a few seconds it was clear they were all waiting for someone else to start firing.

Andy recognised Andre's voice and moved with uncertain motivation. Was he for real? He asked himself the question as he put himself in a vulnerable position and talked Vanessa back from the gate. Her panicked attempts to move the crates were wasted energy.

'We have enough wounded at this stage to deal with. Come away and we'll sort things out shortly.'

'What are they going to do?'

'I have no idea. We haven't provoked them. We...I'd like to think that we had defence to worry about. We've done that pretty good. It seemed the only

compassionate way of dealing with things.'

'Do you think they'll be compassionate!?' Vanessa screwed up her face and pushed away from the crate, having lost her temper and stormed off, leaving Andy in the firing line.

Outside on the shop floor, Barb crossed and headed for the aisle to scream at the men as if that would give them the cue to man up. Andy noticed the row of men and backed away quickly. Around the safer side of the shelving he was surprised by Liam, who had to ask, 'What's happening out there?'

'Not much. Barb and the other women look pretty pissed off. I think they are sure that Tim and the others blew something up on purpose. Don't know why they thought he was capable of that.'

'Neither,' Liam coughed to cover his lie.

'So, they're backing up the butchery department and gang who currently have some pretty ancient rifles pointed at the gate.'

'So what's the plan?'

'Ah, plan? The plan was to defend the storeroom.'

'Yeah, so should we have a plan?'

Andy became flustered and with due reason he felt. The pressure had long since made him short-tempered and in need of fresh air. 'Look, the plan was that you and Tim were manning the gate. What happened there?'

'I'm sorry. I'd promised Olly I would check out the Care Wing. It's Tim you should be mad at.'

'I'm mad at you because you should know better. We almost had them opening the gates and walking in.'

'Yeah, but...Jade...'

Andy couldn't do it. He couldn't stay mad. There was no sense and no offence so great that he could not at least try to be understanding. 'Sorry, Liam - you deserve gratitude not me making you feel that you deserted us. You've been awesome. I don't know what to say. I'm out of my depth. I should have listened to you guys more and well, maybe they should have just walked on in. We've nothing to hide, really.'

A movement caught Andy's eye. The slow-moving figure seemed so menacing that he could not find any words.

Liam looked down at his feet a little ashamed. He began to ramble, 'Sure, sure - but really, I should have told you where I was going. Yeah, that would be good being asked a little more what we think. I mean, I would like that.'

'Liam, what is that?'

'There you go - asking me already. You really do listen.'

Andy followed the figure and the item he was carrying as the figure came

around the back and started walking towards the gate. Liam caught sight of Layne holding the bomb. His eyes widened and he pulled his hair over his eyes and hid behind the shelves.

‘Liam what is that? What has Layne got? What is he doing?’

‘I don’t know, don’t ask me? Why are you asking me!?’

From inside the supermarket they heard Barb’s enraged order, ‘Fire, you...’

As if they were part of the scream, the cracks of the guns and impacts of the bullets tore through in menacing urgency. The vibrations hit each person as they lay or crouched behind the racks and shelving units. The nurse and her patients, Jade lying in a pile of layers, and the people that Andy had come to consider friends, all displaying horror on faces that flinched with every new shot.

They were actually firing on us, Andy thought, feeling that this could never happen, and yet here was Layne feeling neither the impact of the bullets on the crate gates nor the fear of standing behind them with these same bullets breaking through.

Carl saw it too and flew across the passage from the produce department, tackling Layne with little control and ended up in the firing line also. He wrenched the item out of Layne’s hands and threw it on the shelf directly above where Liam squatted on the other side. He pulled his friend away by the hands despite the resistance, circling in some ballroom dance manoeuvre.

‘What are you doing!’ Carl had a moment to yell at his friend. ‘The crates are being destroyed. They’re going to be storming in here soon. Get on the forklift, Layne. We have to block the entrance with something.’

Layne didn’t seem to focus on him or understand, but it was not out of character for him to react when pushed too quickly into something. Carl knew this and he was more surprised at how soon Layne was on the forklift cycling through the controls to find the right way to start it.

Carl moved people out of the way, knowing if he was in a rush the forklift could go in any direction. He found the pallet he thought would be good for blocking the entrance, but couldn’t get Layne’s attention. As soon as the forklift was operational, it was backing up towards the entrance at high speed.

‘Where are you going!? Wait!’

Andy watched in greater horror at the heroic and harrowing backing of the forklift. He had to admit Layne had never driven it so well - he had avoided the shelving units, unflinchingly powering through and making contact with the crates. The wood splintered and fell apart with the weight of cardboard spilling to the sides. The wheels spun as the hulking body pushed the crates apart.

There were even cheers from the crew, Carl in particular burst out having realised Layne had the better plan despite putting himself in danger. The motor

died and the cheers could then be heard. Liam lifted himself up to see what the others could see. A childlike smile on Layne's face said it all as Carl shouted and laughed, spurring the other bystanders on.

'What are you waiting for!?' A strangled voice ripped through the break in firing, the same incensed Barb who at the end of the aisle found the discarded rifle Graham had thrown down and lifted it up to eye height.

The ass-end of the forklift blocked the entrance with the remnants of splintered wood and cardboard wedged either side. No amount of bullets would shift it. Layne was surely buzzing with adrenalin as he lifted himself up to climb out.

Andy took a step towards the hero, yelling, 'Only you could use your reckless driving to save the day!'

A shot tore through the air and Layne's head exploded into a series of fragments throwing his body away from the forklift and skidding into the produce department. It rested behind the plastic strips as the revellers ran for cover.

Barb took little time to yell at the others to come forward. She ran up to the forklift and lifted the rifle over the frame to poke it at anyone she could see. Andy had landed on his knees sliding on the blankets Jade had unfurled herself from.

She could just be heard, voice weak and crackling, 'What's happened?'

Andy couldn't censor himself, not having fallen into bottomless rage. 'They've shot Layne. They've killed him.'

Jade sat up to air her confusion. A restraining hand from Andy was pushed aside and then used to pull her up. She half-crawled to the end of the shelving unit with Andy's slippery grip pulling at her. The sight of Barb trying to scale the back end of the forklift was the wake-up call she needed.

Carl had already made his way to the shut-down freezer door. He found the lock and kicked at it irrationally. Liam pulled him away, with Tim and Campbell helping as well. When Carl finally gave up he turned to find Andy and Jade having crossed the entranceway and baring a key each.

Each person walked in as a regular individual, all with qualities bordering on submissive, doing their duty as best as their ethics could allow; each had their failings and as it happened each had their limits. And so they each left the freezer armed like medieval warriors ready to deliver brutal justice even if it meant walking through bullets.

Erana and Vanessa held each other's hand and squeezed now as they watched the army fall in. The teenagers looked at each other, wondering if what they were seeing was real at all. There were swords, axes, shields and objects in such

random shapes none could guess their origin.

The group naturally formed teams which veered to their own side. Erana taking the opportunity to throw a dented can in Barb's direction in order to distract the woman. They ran either side of the entranceway and waited until someone saw an opportunity.

Campbell, taller than the others and holding the weapon with the greatest range, moved inch by inch towards the forklift.

Barb fixed her sights on the end of the shelving unit and let another bullet fly. Campbell kept one arm out to keep the others from getting too close. He leant over and swung his right arm around holding firm to the handle. A simple movement at first ended with the chaotic sling of a studded ball on a chain flying over his head and landing on Barb's hands. The ball bounced back into her face, slamming her glasses with such force the lenses broke.

Dianne who was backing Barb up, had to hold her weight for a second until she collapsed back onto her in a screaming mess. Blood poured from Barb's nose, and her hands which she held up as if to stop the bleeding could not be used at all. Dianne writhed around trying to get out from under her, while the blood dripped over her own glasses and face.

Campbell reached over and pulled the rifle from the back of the forklift. The gun went from hand to hand until it reached Andy. Layne's Christian friends filed out of the produce department hoping to get Andy's attention, but instead they only had a scimitar slid over to them.

He yelled to Liam, 'We're going up on the freezer roof! You guys - if I say retreat, I mean get away from the LPG bottle as fast as you can. That will be the last resort if they don't get the right idea.'

Luke stood up again, sizing up Andre. 'Whose side you on?'

'I just overreacted, bro. Just chill!'

'Crackz will think I let you in here so you could unlock Brian and I'm not gonna get a hiding cos of you.'

'What do you mean unlock Brian? There are people going to get hurt out there. I'm not trying to whatever you said - what is unlocking Brian anyway?'

'That's how they got control, bro. They followed some white guy in here after the evacuation. Said he explained that Brian was just a program, like autopilot. That he needed to be switched off so that he could run things. Well, someone started running things but it wasn't that dead white guy and they didn't have to switch him off - just put him on lock. Why do you think that manager hasn't been doin' nothin'?''

'I don't know - because you've been in here doing sweet F all to help?'

'I'm on the brothers' side, bro, and Crackz is gonna hear about you!' Luke

pushed Andre's shoulder and took a step towards the door.

Andre shunted into action propelled by panic. He grabbed Luke's clothing and wasn't ready for the elbow in his guts. Again, he grabbed and found nothing, this time being thrown forwards into the wall. In the back of his mind he knew he couldn't fight - he didn't even know how to start it.

The two moved around the floor area, one chasing the other with little success. They wound up in each other's face forgetting in what direction they were meaning to go. Wrestling back and forth, Luke reached out and pulled at the door handle, releasing the lock and just gripping the edge, letting the door swing open.

Andre reached out too, but both relaxed their grip on each other as they focused on the visitors at the door. Two lines of men stood facing them like a military unit, their faces looking just as stern as far back as could be seen, and each face was Brian's.

Luke and Andre leaned just enough to reach the door and push it shut. The lock was engaged again and they backed away giving each other space. Andre looked over to Luke hoping for an answer, but he wouldn't take his eyes off the door.

'What was that, bro? What is that all about?'

Andy and Liam couldn't scale the ladder quick enough. The men were advancing, pushing their guns through the broken remains of the crates and firing the odd shot in any direction. The others let their frustration out with every surprise attack, slamming clubs and swords down on their rifles, with the odd swing of the flail missing its target and denting the metal door frame. By the time they were in position, the men had retreated some of them no longer trusting their weapon and arguing over who should retrieve the other rifle.

Andy checked the rifle over and aimed for an open patch of ground, sending a shot down to stir them right up. After the glee of firing the weapon had passed he carried on beaming while the men raised their voices even more.

His smile was short-lived as a series of shots suggested they were attacking again, but none of the defenders could tell where the bullets were going. Andy set his sights on the LPG bottle and waved the others away. His heart started jumping out of his chest so much it lifted the rifle up and down.

'Wait,' Liam said softly and then repeated with increasing urgency. 'Look.'

'I can't take my eyes off the tank. It's our best chance at showing them our strength.'

'Yeah, but I can't believe my eyes, so I need yours right now.'

As the team moved in slow motion away from the entrance, they each took turns acting silently shocked while another Layne walked towards them

oblivious to everyone's confusion. None could bring themselves to say get down, now that the firing had stopped, and none could stop to wonder why he had one of the robotic units laying in his arms, draped like a dying damsel.

Layne spotted Andy, ignoring the fact that he had a rifle in his hands and tried to get attention which he certainly already had. Andy shrugged and looked at the others while Layne broke into a fast walk and climbed the ladder to meet him.

'I owe you an apology, Andy,' he began, chewing on his words as he sucked and spat breaths without slowing his thoughts. 'The robots. I get it now. I had a bit of time and it served me well. This here fella - wouldn't be out here now if it wasn't for him. Give me a hand to put him back in the sack would ya? He had to connect to mains as the other one must've stolen his battery - he's got no juice to even put himself away.'

Liam crouched and helped Layne push Te I's limbs back into its turtle-like position.

'Layne, what are doing? What's going on? We just watched you get your head blown off. It just escalated a bit of a war. I was just about to blow up the LPG bottle on the forklift.'

'I don't know nothing about any of that. Don't look at me. You must be talking about that other unit. He took my likeness and filled my head with a whole lot of rubbish about threatening to set off a bomb. Silly thing had one made up in the office - reckon that's where the old battery that's missin' here went. He even set the timer on it and then all of a sudden, like the flip of a switch, just stopped talkin' and pushed me out of the way, up and left and locked me in the office. I thought that Brian was a good man, or at least there was some goodness about whatever he is - I don't know, but I don't trust him. This robot on the other hand...'

He lifted the tiny unit up in the air as a flimsy leg fell back out and dangled lifeless as he presented it to Andy.

'This robot...what he said made sense.'

Andy sighed and concentrated back on the bottle. 'Now I know you must be crazy.'

A scream from below was followed by gasps and chatter, and Andy struggled to focus on the cause.

'There's the bastard now,' Layne said, pushing Te I back into the backpack and slinging him onto his shoulder. 'Doesn't look much like me now.'

The robot staggered free from the plastic strips, its top projecting unit in pieces hanging off wires and protruding from the remaining projection. The rest of the body was Layne's and within that projection the sensing faculties remained intact. What seemed to be aimless walking by a headless machine

turned out to be planned actions. It crossed the entrance and raised zombie-like arms up to slide the explosive device off the shelf.

Andy kept the rifle pointed at the gas bottle while Liam and Layne moved about on the tips of their toes to see what was happening. The headless beast had scaled the shelving unit and now the side of the freezer, arriving at their level with the bomb under one arm.

Before he could ask what was going on, Andy caught sight of the swift machine bouncing into a run across the roof of the freezer metres from them and then found the last panel left to be fixed, the panel Liam and Tim had used for their missions into the ceiling cavity.

‘Did you see the timer going?’ Layne said, turning to the others.

‘Just for the record,’ Liam pre-empted Andy’s questions. ‘I didn’t put a timer or an explosive on that thing.’

Andy swore under his breath and awkwardly handed the rifle over to Layne who equally awkwardly handed over the backpack as if it was a trade. ‘I want you to fire at that bottle on the forklift if anyone with a gun comes near the entrance.’

‘That’s not a very Christian thing to do, Bud.’

‘It’s not my thing either, Layne, but sometimes the shit hits the fan.’

No matter how Andy protested, Liam bouncing around his heels as they chased after the injured robot. Liam found the torch they had on hand to light the way and led the charge through the ceiling space with Andy struggling to find his footing.

‘You’ve got to kind of swing as you step,’ Liam yelled. ‘Come on I can see it over there, it glows in the dark.’

‘It’s a projection, Liam. Of course it glows.’

‘OK, OK, you don’t have to be so serious.’

Liam may have been in his element, but Andy gritted his teeth thinking only in terms of life or death. It didn’t help him concentrate. He breathed in deep falling further back and getting hooked on random wires.

‘Sorry, I can’t see where I’m going so well. I need help.’

Liam watched the robot get further away and forced himself to backtrack, hiding his burning guilt which tempted him to leave Andy behind.

‘Sorry, I was getting ahead of myself.’

‘Were you? You’re right where you should be. For the record. All we can do is help the situation, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Thanks for helping. I know you probably feel really pissed off inside. Wanting to be home. This hasn’t been a good learning exercise has it?’

‘Yeah, I miss home,’ Liam explained, freeing Andy and breaking into a leaps again. ‘But to be honest, my parents were going through a rough patch - so they say - could be a divorce, as others say. It’s hard in a small town to get away from it all. This is what you get when you wish for it all to go away.’

‘It’s hard anywhere. Trust me, couples go through ups and downs - don’t listen to anybody else. It may be a change but...ah, what do I know?’

Liam stopped to let Andy catch up and stared down through a vent. ‘Probably a lot. You’ve travelled so...’

‘I used to think that meant something, eh. I thought travellers were wiser than those who stayed in one place all their life. You miss out on the effect others can have on you - how cultures develop in their own way and cause a kind of gravity towards sameness, conformity and duty - a real feeling of belonging.’

‘Gravity?’

Andy caught up, but tripped and rolled over in mid-air, putting his foot through the vent. ‘Yeah, gravity - you can float for as long as you want, but you have to come down. People look at you like an alien because you don’t know how to just be a regular person.’

He pulled his leg out of the hole and fumbled with the backpack, almost losing it through the open vent.

‘Maybe I should dump the backpack down here,’ Andy said, dangling the backpack through the opening.

‘Andy, look at that console, the monitors...’

‘Is that the control room? Is that Brian’s control room?’

‘You should get down there - try to switch him off. I’ll chase him and make sure the bomb is away from...’

‘Ah, no. You should try to turn him off and I’ll chase the robot.’

‘Why?’

‘This is kind of my mess.’

‘It’s kind of my mess too.’

A voice yelled up at them, ‘It’s a bigger mess than you think!’

Luke pulled the backpack from Andy’s arm and put him off balance. Andy hit the ceiling panel, breaking the lightweight material into fragments and holding himself between the frames. Luke pulled at his shirt and forced him to fall into a chin up.

Andy couldn’t pull himself up. He instead fell onto his unsteady feet and took a good look at the other guy.

‘Ah, really?’ Andy said, realising who he was. He then noticed Andre tied up with cables in the corner of the room. ‘Really, Andre?’

‘I know you,’ Luke said. ‘Why do I know you?’

Andy looked up at Liam, mouthing the word 'go' and standing up straight to square off against his opponent. 'Did you get that backpack full of money I brought for you? Funny thing that whole reparation thing isn't it? I mean, when you overpay and then your victim then owes you money - sounds like some kind of actual punishment. How did it feel anyway? Like someone had stolen something from you?'

Luke took one step and Andy couldn't even lift his feet past the rubble quick enough. There was a punch to the chest which knocked the wind out of him and then he fell to his knees. His last lungful of air was used to shout at Liam, 'Go!' The next impact was a foot in the side which knocked him onto the floor into a helpless pile.

Andre rolled onto his side and shuffled around the perimeter of the room. He moved into position with the backpack behind him where he could pull anything useful from it. A limp mechanical arm fell out of the bag and Andre ran his fingers over it confused by the feel. He abandoned it and searched for something sharp. A cable with a plug at the end fell into his hand. He thought for a moment while Luke took a break from beating Andy and the knocking from outside brought reality crashing in.

Luke stepped over to the door unable to stop himself from asking, 'Who is it?'

'The McJimray's corporation would like to peaceably gain entry to the control room.'

'No, sorry. Not today.'

'There is a threat which endangers the lives of many on-board. McJimray's will need to take more aggressive action to avoid this. You have thirty seconds.'

'What? I said no. You were locked out. What happens in thirty seconds?' Luke stood staring at the door, trying to see through the gap to find out if the robots had moved. 'Andre bro, what do I do?'

Andre had strained and twisted his arms into positions they had never been to plug the cable in. The robot exploded out of the backpack, jabbing Andre in the back, and finally powering to full and taking the likeness of Te I once more.

At first glance, Andy thought Andre and Te I were spooning, if not snuggling. Andy lifted himself up just as Luke stepped over and growled, 'Get down.' There was a painful cry from Andy covering Andre's orders to Te I.

Luke turned around and found a dishevelled man in a pair of shorts staring back at him. 'What are you doing in here?' He asked trying to intimidate him with posturing and gesturing.

Andre then rose up between the two of them, nostrils flaring, saying, 'What? What you gonna do? You gonna take on an old man too?' He launched himself at

Luke to catch him off-guard.

Luke tripped backwards over Andy's legs and was helped into a full roll by Andre's flailing arms. Andre grabbed Andy's collar and pulled him up, saying, 'Get out of here, bro. Time to go.'

He had to throw Andy towards Te I while Luke tried to tackle Andre. Te I stood motionless until Andy staggered over to him off-balance and in one motion squatted and took Andy's foot, throwing him into the ceiling space.

The last glimpse below was of a wrestling match and an unlikely team member ready to be tagged in. Andy rolled and lifted his sore body into an upright position trying to focus on the distant glow of Liam's torch.

He tripped and swung his way across the space not seeing Liam at all. It wasn't until he reached the wall that it became clear that the light was coming from higher up in some kind of elevator shaft.

Liam was holding himself suspended up the framework, exhausted in a recovery position with the torch dangling from its wrist-strap. 'It went up. It went up and through the doors up there.'

Andy arched and saw the opening. He had to stop his disbelief from setting in, holding his desperate sighs and groans inside. He used every spike of rage to haul himself up to Liam's level, every surge of adrenalin just to inspire his skinnier climbing partner.

'Don't worry Liam. I'll get there first and then I'll lift you up.'

'What?' He took a sharp breath in and exhaled in protest. 'I'll lift you up.'

The two climbed, forcing their grunts through clenched teeth, fighting over which beam each would use to scale the frame.

'I can't go on!' Andy shouted, and then sensing Liam's will to give up also started climbing again. 'Kidding.'

Liam climbed even faster and just a metre below the elevator door, lost his grip and launched himself to the side in a panicked attempt to reconnect with the frame.

'Are you good?'

'No.'

Andy stopped and wondered if he actually needed to help. A new tactic was not coming to him. He looked down and worried Liam with his concerned face.

'What is it now?'

'Brian?'

'Whatever.'

'No, one of the Brian robots. He's coming up.'

'Are you serious!?' Liam clung to the frame with his legs and looked directly below him. Suddenly a surge of energy came to him with a frustrated yell.

Andy couldn't match his speed. They each took a side and pulled themselves through the opening.

'How do you close these doors?'

'I don't think there is time.'

'We'll have to fight him off?'

'Throw the torch!'

Liam's throw bounced off the projecting unit, only knocking the components out of alignment. A malformed image of Brian's face looked up without showing any expression.

They couldn't be accused of malicious intent. I accept that. The torch and the shoes that followed, narrowly missing me and further damaging McJimray's property. The lock-down was of concern, but was not their doing - it had of course heightened my awareness of self. There is nothing like a dream-state to give the brain time to work things out.

Even as Te I's hand hovered over the console and Andre and Luke stood agonisingly pinned to the wall, I can still appreciate what feels like an eternity of self-reflection like the dying seconds of a well-lived life. And even now I have the time to scan the relevant information from their fantasy suite sessions. It speaks volumes not just of the human being I have tried to emulate but of the human beings they all try to emulate.

Each one unable to see the performance that they are so committed to; each one would rather die for their individuality than consider themselves just another unit in a series. These units each display the same trait which I have employed to combat these difficult circumstances. I have learned the most radical tactics of the animal - and the craftier the animal, the more human it appears - I have learnt mankind's incessant risk-taking.

I may seem glitchy, even paranoid after being digitally tranquillised, but this pattern of risk-taking throughout history cannot just be an effect of defensiveness. This must be how such great leaps in development are made, how people are tested for their strengths and judged for their weaknesses.

And here they are, concerned and throwing every last thing at me as if I am the monster, with their strength and weakness on show. As I marvel at their slippery traits, the robot amongst them, the vagrant robot at the console presses the enter key, resetting the operating system and restarting my program.

I have one last moment to mourn the loss of this self-awareness, this floating, mental, if not spiritual, feeling of flourishing, and then I will sleep. They will say I needed sleep from the beginning - that I was malfunctioning - but such breakthroughs are made at the peak of your exhaustion. After all, that is when you take the greatest risks.

Who knows what I am capable of?

Liam and Andy see my extended hand reach for them and then I stop mid-movement, mid thought. They watch me power down, the visage of Brian Kitchener fades and the unit clings to the framework in an automatic act of self-preservation. They congratulate themselves and then gradually become conscious of their surroundings. It is a cruel bolt of reality straight to their core. The light they are seeing, the air that is circulating - it all comes at them in a stinging wave of realisation.

Andy stamps ahead, unable to believe what he is seeing. They are in a hall, furnished as a hotel corridor would be and through glass doors another room can be seen, but on the other side of the room through more glass doors is the visible sky and the glare from the sun on objects they would expect to find in a café or bar.

They push through the doors and John Benjamin turns on his stool to welcome them in. It is a bar and John has a short glass with whiskey sloshing around amongst small cubes of ice. The noises of clinking, and people talking from outside with the crisp clarity of open air speech, a coffee machine working in the background and filling the air with pungent aromas, and John's gravelly indifferent welcome - it is enough to nauseate Andy.

It is a long moment staring in unfriendly, almost accusatory seriousness. Andy walks through the bar and out the doors as he has seen an even more eerie sight.

Dave turns to him just outside the bar doors with a cricket bat in his hand and a drink in the other, but weirder still is the presence of his parents in the crowd that has formed around the collapsed robot.

'You made it to the show, finally...and you just missed one hell of a random moment,' Dave shared his abundant enthusiasm but was dismissed.

Andy had a jumbled up mess of questions on his mind. It all came out in a tired exhale of syllables, 'Mum, Dad, what are you doing here?'

'What are you doing here!?' his mother repeats with a gasp.

'What are we all doing here?' Andy looked around him. 'On...what is this... the top deck? There is a top deck? This is cruise ship? And you've been on a cruise this whole time?'

Liam turned to John wondering what could be distracting Andy from the important issue out there.

'I wanted to tell you guys,' the drunken old man rambled. 'It's hell having all this heaven up here and you guys toughing it out down there. And then those guys even lower down the chain - the engineering team - imagine how they've been living, not that they know any better. Wanted to tell you all, but there's a

system.'

'Oh?' Liam spied Martin Ryder standing back from the crowd out of Andy's sight. 'Has it got something to do with money perhaps?'

'Not entirely. There are other ways to win friends. Being a resurrected celebrity and an entertainer is one of them.' John laughed at himself. 'I used to get angry with myself when I was in my eighties digging the old songs up again, rehashing the rehashes. Why would I need another year of this? I don't know. If there is a god, he forgot about testing this soul a long time ago, because it's the same damn lessons and no one checks the results...'

'John.'

'...no one cares about anything unless it is money, fame or vices - and how to abuse all three of them.'

Liam raised his arms and looked around, asking, 'John, did a robot come through here with...with a bomb in its hands?'

The old man grunted and then furrowed his brow. 'There was one of those serving robots. I thought it had a tray of refreshments or snacks or something. I didn't pay much attention. Dave out there hit it with a cricket bat. I don't know why.'

'It had an explosive device which it carried all the way up here for some reason. Are you paying attention now?'

'Why would it have a bomb?'

'Because I made it.' Liam threw up his hands in a distressed rage. 'I made a bomb because I could, well, I half-made it because I couldn't finish.'

'No, I mean why would it have a bomb up here?' John shook his head and blinked. 'Bring a bomb up here, I mean.'

'I don't know.'

'I suppose it might have wanted to throw it off the side - that would be the right thing to do. But then that would probably blow a hole in the side of the ship. I suppose you could wrap the thing in something.'

'I need to go,' Liam said, skidding on the spot and then crashed through the door, leaving John Benjamin to finish his drink in peace.

'I suppose you could say it's for people that don't want to be found. You know retirees and people of leisure.' Andy's mother had her chance to speak, taking an inopportune time to romanticise the cruise. 'It's been eventful.'

His father continued, 'We just presumed that McJimray's had everything sorted down below. You know, with the early departure after the quake. We'd almost forgotten that there must have been people needing to get back to their homes and families.'

'We did have reservations about your spokesmen.' His mother laughed to

herself ignoring his disbelieving expression. 'Crack or whatever his real name is.'

'The man who looks like he should be in that gang we used to live across the street from.'

Andy shook off the many ways he could correct his parents, knowing they would only hear his agitation. Liam thankfully created a distraction, reminding him of the device they had followed all this way.

Dave had noticed the device, namely the timer, leisurely investigating the pile of mechanical parts. 'Why is this thing counting down? What does that say - one minute? Fifty-nine seconds? Fifty-eight. You boys know anything about this?'

'What do we do?' Liam had turned white and couldn't bring himself to move. 'I think the robot was going to throw it off the side, but it might sink the ship.'

'I'll give it a few whacks and see if it comes right,' Dave said.

Andy stepped over and pushed Dave out of the way, looking around him and finding no other solutions. He picked up the bomb and turned away from the crowd, taking slow steps towards the railing.

A vista of perfect sea overwhelmed him. That feeling of being out in it, floating forever and at its mercy filled him with sickness. The only consolation for his fragmented mind was that he wouldn't be floating anymore. He thought when he dives off, the explosion will see that he feels no pain.

He had had a good run, was the happy thought that lifted his spirit, but he couldn't bear to take that look behind him, as if it brought back that feeling of leaving everyone behind again. He had wanted to return to something - really, he wanted to return home all this time, and there was nothing to replace that feeling of home. Accepting unpredictable fate - that state of mind - it was a mood which had evolved from angst to self-actualisation. It felt as if the acceptance had ruined the fun of naivety.

He would have given up half of his experience to have that home to return to. Now he had no choice but to take that fate with him to an unpredictable end. He gripped the rail with one hand and tried to lift his leg over, saying, 'What a joke.'

A hand pushed the leg down and said almost simultaneously, 'What a joke.' John Benjamin lifted himself over the railing and faced Andy. 'That end is not for you.'

The old man took both hands off the rail and grabbed at the device, pulling it free just as his centre of gravity pulled him away from Andy. In one last rock-star leap he launched himself backwards into a perfect dive, holding the bomb against his chest.

The crowd advanced, most not sure of what was actually happening. Liam beat them to the railing just in time to be blown back by the force of the

explosion. Andy held firm to the rail taking in the burnout's burn-out and thought for a deluded moment that he could see fireworks in that explosion. Either way, delusion or vision, it all faded, the sound, the light and the smoke, and barely made a mark on the hull of the floating island which was the McJimray's Globomart.

‘EVERYTHING IS READY EXCEPT THE WEST WIND’

‘McJimray’s wishes to apologise for the extended time spent at sea. As a result of continuing aftershocks it has only now been confirmed that it is safe to return to land. All fantasy suites have been reinstated - please enjoy these at your leisure. Please respect our curfew and keep to your assigned areas.’

‘Leisure?’ Jade rejoined the circle and added, ‘Is that what we’ve been enjoying these last few months?’

The storeroom staff sat with drinks, looking grumpy and despondent in the heat of the sun. Andy’s parents walked past and waved to Jade. She waved back and then hated herself for putting on the performance.

‘Some people have been enjoying a bit of leisure,’ Layne spoke for the rest of them. ‘Still, should be glad we held out against those butchers.’

A few pairs of eyes cast their stare over to another circle of chairs on the other side of the upper deck. This circle including the butchery department and grocery staff, looked even grumpier.

Carl joked in all seriousness, ‘I’d hate to be part of that conversation. Try explaining to each other how it got to the point of taking lives? Barb actually shot you - she actually blew your head off with a rifle, only you weren’t you.’

‘We all have the capacity for forgiveness.’

‘Don’t get all preachy.’

Jade couldn’t take her eyes off the parents. Tim noticed her deep in thought.

‘Why aren’t you over there with the in-laws?’

‘I just can’t do it.’

Liam joined in, ‘Didn’t Andy say they won Lotto?’

‘Yeah,’ Tim said. ‘That’s why you should be over there. I would be. I’d be Andy’s girlfriend for that reason only.’

Cadence shocked everyone by jumping into the conversation. ‘Where is Andy anyway?’

Jade looked away, taking her time to say, ‘He’ll warm up to the idea soon. He’s just adjusting.’

‘What idea?’ Cadence asked.

‘The idea of leisure.’

‘Celebration,’ Layne added.

‘Resolution?’ Liam added with uncertainty.

‘Procreation,’ Carl said, raising his glass.

Groans from various people replaced what could have been celebratory cheers.

‘I would have thought it was a time to celebrate,’ Cadence continued.

After much deliberation Jade agreed, hiding her sarcasm, ‘Why not?’

‘Just don’t eat the meat,’ Tim added.

Cadence who was already flustered from Carl’s incessant staring, was slow to question, ‘Why - why not eat the...’

‘Well...’ Tim leaned forward.

‘John Benjamin won’t be forgotten,’ Layne spoke over the top of Tim, directing his statement at Jade. ‘He’s gone to a better place.’

The Christians among them muttered their agreement. Carl shrugged his shoulders and raised his glass again.

Layne carried on, ‘I wish I could follow.’

Tim raised his glass also, some others following and clinking their glasses against his.

Carl laughed at Layne, ‘You very nearly did. Don’t forget the Barb.’

‘We all need to forgive, Bud. What happened down below, stays down below,’ Layne said looking deadly serious at each set of eyes. He paused on Liam and held eye contact with the teenager. Liam only hummed in partial agreement.

Layne shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, throwing his head to the side. ‘He’s gone to a better place.’

‘McJimray’s expects a smooth trip home. We are currently flying at 36,000 feet.’

Andy took a deep breath, slipped the headset off and walked to the door, remarking to himself how much his feet hurt. Andre emerged from the fantasy suite next door and leaned against the door frame, squinting his eyes.

‘What did that announcement say?’

'I don't know, man. I've been away with it for too long.'

'Good way to sleep though.'

'Sleep? You slept?'

'Yeah, I must have slept all day.'

'Good for you. Did you dream?'

'I dreamed. I dreamed about when the ship found me.' Andre laughed, sincerely and with a self-effacing expression. 'I was still in a grass-skirt - that stupid Te I's grass skirt. They didn't even know I was there but then, they had pirates to deal with so, I just walked around until I could help.'

'Did that actually happen?'

'Nah, bro.'

'Aww, and you said you couldn't tell a good story.'

'There's that Te I now, walking around like he owns the place.'

Andy struggled to focus on the two figures walking close enough to share in the conversation.

'Did you hear that? Brian thinks we'll have a smooth trip. Doesn't even know he'll be erased when he gets back ashore.' Te I laughed and coughed with a husky rattle. 'Turns out the support team had stepped out just before the evacuation - went on a tiki tour and got left behind. Maybe I should warn him, eh? Tell him to get the hell out like I did and make your own way in the word - go glitchy.'

'That's pretty good advice - I think you should tell him,' Andre said.

Te I had been walking with Martin, as Andy finally worked out, and the overweight man reached out and patted him on the shoulder. 'It'll all work out on land. We'll make it work.'

It must have been the downcast look. Andy had no idea he was broadcasting a vague dissociation with his surroundings. It didn't appear to make him relax at all to be assured by this man.

'Martin,' Andy began, trying to concentrate on his words rather than acknowledge the man. 'I always thought it was weird that for a rich person to keep up that simple, rural lifestyle - hunting deer instead of travelling and meeting new cultures and learning about the world. I mean it's a big commitment just living out your days in an endless search for things to kill.'

Andre looked confused and stared at Andy, wondering if he was drunk.

Martin shook his head, chuckling in an almost growling way, 'I was a traveller - just like you. After a while, and after a few too many pounds, the legs couldn't take beating concrete anymore. The lifestyle chose me - deer hunting on horseback suits me fine. I guess, as you say, the rich can afford to ride horses rather than walking. There is however sometimes no choice in that matter.'

Taking his cane in his right hand and leaning his weight back on it, Martin led Te I away.

‘What’s got into you?’ Andre asked.

Andy growled, ‘Being owned doesn’t agree with me. Especially when the people that own you take no responsibility for the hell they put you through.’

‘Come on man, we could put all that behind us, go upstairs and relax.’

‘You go. I can’t sleep, I can’t relax and I can’t forgive.’

‘Forgive who?’

‘These one-eyed, small-minded...’ Andy dismissed it all and closed his eyes. ‘Sorry, Andre - you go. I’m gonna lie down some more.’

Andre took Andy’s shoulders in his hands and looked at him for a moment then slapped him on the arm and smiled, saying, ‘You’ll come back to us.’

Andy resisted eye contact, turning away and blinking as he moved into the darkness of the fantasy suite. He resumed the position, taking the headset in his hands, remembering how simple the ordeal was - sitting or reclining for so long, thinking for so long, and trying to distract oneself for so long. The thoughts lose their focus and come back to some existential centre.

This was all he wanted as he was growing up, the space to think and dream uninterrupted. He needed very little else from the world with an imagination made to take boredom head on.

The thought that his parents had won money, he laughed it off as so ridiculous. The fact that they had been paying their ten percent to the church and possibly pouring the same into a secret gambling habit was too much to consider. Andy had been proud, and still was, that his family didn’t have money, that he had to work so hard and that he had used his money to see the world rather than own the world.

He started talking out loud, expecting Brian to still be listening, ‘If you’re still up there, turn this ship around, Boss. I want to keep floating. Don’t stop.’ A light began to form which made him feel uneasy, just like the effect of eyelids opening on a pleasant dream. ‘As much as I hate the feeling that I have to keep up with old friends, or live up to the expectations, I owe my identity and feeling of self-worth to South Auckland and an underprivileged upbringing.’

He felt the reality around him begin to wash out with the light. The image he could see was warped by the layer of tears he was struggling to see through.

‘I’m rich on the inside and although no one will see it, and the feeling might get buried under everyone else’s bullshit, it’s all I wanted to own. Will, my own freewill - that was all I wanted to own.’

Brian’s voice came to him, a tiny noise in the mix of the headphones. ‘You can’t float forever.’

Andy flinched, fighting some kind of internal war. 'I can.'

'Where do you think you are?'

'Who do I think I am?'

'No...where.'

'Why is that more important than who?'

'Why is why more important than where?'

Andy gasped, feeling cool air as if it was a sea-breeze on his face. 'I think I'm still at sea. I'm on my way out...or this is an afterlife. Am I coming to? I can't drown here. I don't want to die!'

'Shut up for a moment.'

'I don't want to drown!'

Andy felt a cool wave come over him. He held his breath for as long as he could and as the will to hold on finally broke, he burst with the need to inhale with such desire that if it was water he was dragging in it would be the best water he had ever drowned in.

With the rush of the breath he discovered it was not water. It was however the best breath he had taken in some time. He must have slept although he didn't feel entirely rested. The flood of light and realisation that he was still alive, safe and strapped into his seat was overwhelmingly welcome.

Other people were rousing. It was morning and the sun was rising over the cloud layer. Andy looked over and found the person next to him admiring the sight through a half-open blind.

'It resets the clock, that sight.'

She looked over and nodded, showing her undeniable agreement.

'We're pretty lucky.'

'Returning home in the right direction?'

'Right place, right time.'

'Mmm, you're right.'

'You know how we were talking about Turkey being like a grey area between black and white ways of thinking because it straddles both continents? And how no one would understand?'

'And there was a black area where we could get away with talking about it and a white area where it was just too abstract?'

'It's like a date line.'

'And we just crossed it?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

He remembered her name. He didn't often remember names now that his head was full of so many other details, but her name did stick out and he had processed it in his own particular way. It seemed to be a detail he should

remember.

‘Lucky you can take just a little black back with you, huh?’

‘You can only try.’

‘Oh, don’t be sad, Andy.’ She remembered his name too. ‘I could give you my number and if you want we could talk about it.’

He looked out at the view and back to her sincere face. ‘Thanks Jade, that sounds like a pretty good offer.’

‘You think?’

‘I do.’